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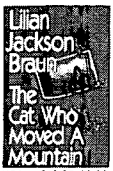

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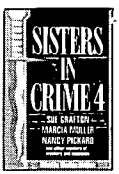

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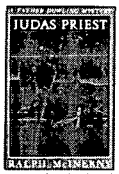

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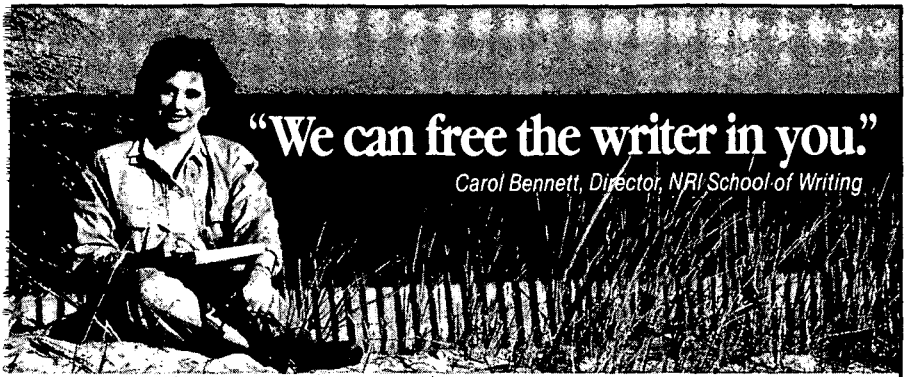

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In "Schroeder's Stepfather," she has created a haunting space the reader may inhabit long after the final page is turned . . .

SCHROEDER'S STEPFATHER

by JOYCE CAROL OATES

1.

How swift, and how irrevocable.

And how ironic: for by then the hurricane had blown out harmlessly into the Atlantic. No one in the entire state of New Jersey would die of it except, in a manner of speaking, as his stepson John interpreted it, poor Jack!

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2.

Eighteen hours of pelting rains, gale-force winds, flooding in north central New Jersey where the elder Schroeders lived, but at dawn of September 23 the air was sunny and unexpectedly steamy, there were glittering pools of water everywhere, smells of broken things, mangled green.

It was the first time in many years that John Schroeder and his wife Laurel were visiting his mother Miriam and his stepfather Jack Schroeder in Clifton, New Jersey; relations between John and the elder Schroeders had always been somewhat strained, but John's mother had written to invite them, she'd seemed to be appealing to them to please come visit, so John had decided they would make the drive down from Boston, why not?—a visit to his mother and his stepfather now he was safely married, fully and happily adult, could do no harm.

The first night, when they were undressing for bed, Laurel told John emphatically, as if it were a fact they'd been contesting, "Your mother is a very sweet woman, John, so kind, generous . . ." and John smiled, saying, "But she didn't protect me from him."

3.

How it happened: late Saturday morning they'd driven out together, John Schroeder and his stepfather Jack Schroeder, to investigate storm damage at Lake Chinquapin, where Jack Schroeder owned lakefront property, when the sight of his badly battered shingleboard cottage and dock so upset the elder Schroeder that he died on the debris-strewn beach: collapsed, fell, died within minutes: of what would be diagnosed by the emergency room staff at Mt. Royal General Hospital as cardiac failure.

Jack Schroeder had been a barrel-bodied man in the long years of John Schroeder's boyhood, mildly asthmatic, a hard drinker, fifty pounds overweight; now, in his late sixties, he'd seemed to have shrunk in both height and girth, and he'd had to quit drinking entirely, but it was plain that his health was dubious: his face slack and flushed as if newly sunburnt, his eyes small, rheumy, pinched at the corners, and his breath hoarse, often harsh, nearly always audible. Where at one time the man's bristling hair had seemed to lift from his forehead and even his shaggy eyebrows had seemed charged with static electricity, now what remained of his yellowish-white hair was a few lank strands combed ineffectually over his shiny bald crown; his hands trembled when he grew excited; his

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mood might swing within minutes from cheeriness and loquaciousness to worry, suspicion, distraction, dread. So John Schroeder had not been truly surprised, though of course he'd been badly shocked, by the fact of his stepfather's sudden death.

My God; one minute the old man was stalking about on the beach above his devastated dock, puffy-faced, flailing his arms, cursing out the insurance company for what he was certain they'd do, or would refuse to do, to compensate him for damages, the next minute he was tearing at his shirt collar, whimpering, "Oh, oh—*oh*" like a frightened child. Then he fell to his knees, and then clumsily forward onto his stomach and face before John could catch him, and suddenly he lay writhing in the wet sand amid the storm litter of broken tree limbs, curling leaves, shattered glass. John supposed his stepfather was having a seizure of some kind, a stroke, an asthmatic attack or heart attack, he knew from his mother that Jack's health was poor, and he tried to remain calm thinking what to do, crouched over the stricken man and holding his shoulders, finally turning him onto his back so that he could give him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation as he'd been instructed twenty years before as a lifeguard, but the old man fought him, struck him in the face with his flailing fists, and then suddenly he stopped moving entirely, his terrible rasping breath stopped, there he lay like a big-bellied beached fish, his pink mouth gaping slackly open and his small damp eyes rolled up into his head. John, who'd been taught by his stepfather to call him "Father," and, somewhat clumsily, just a day or two before, to call him "Jack," could summon no proper word to call him now, but rose swiftly, and ran back to his car cupping his hands to his mouth and shouting, "Help! Help! Is anyone here—" though knowing there was no one there, or at least no one within earshot or visibility, so he hadn't any choice but to leave the unconscious man lying there on his back and drive three miles to the village of Chinquapin to call for an ambulance.

By the time John Schroeder placed his call, his stepfather Jack Schroeder was dead.

By the time the rescue squad arrived, John Schroeder's stepfather was dead beyond resuscitation.

4.

It was true, John Schroeder was legally the adopted "son" of Jack Schroeder, who'd married John's mother when he was eight years old and had been fatherless for six years, yet he remained the man's

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"stepson" as Jack Schroeder remained John's "stepfather" after thirty years, and nothing would ever change that fact, not the physical diminution of the elder man, not his considerable loss of aggression and what John Schroeder's mother had nervously called his high spirits, not even his death out there at Lake Chinquapin in the very presence of the man who was his legally adopted "son" and had been so for nearly thirty-one years. John Schroeder could not recall his true father except to know that his name was not Schroeder and that he did not resemble his mother's second husband in any way.

Before marrying his wife Laurel, John Schroeder had been involved with several young women each of whom, in turn, had one day in a moment of unthinking intimacy dared to call him Jack; and each time John Schroeder had had to explain quietly that he was not in fact "Jack"—his name was John. If one or another of the young women forgot, or persisted, John would say, more forcefully, "I mean it; I'm not 'Jack.' There was room in my family for only one 'Jack' and that was the man who married my mother after my father died."

What John had told none of these women, not even his wife Laurel, was that there'd once been a child, a little boy, called Jack, in fact often called Jacky, but he'd lost his name at the age of eight when he and his mother went to live with a man named Jack—Jack Schroeder—the man who was his stepfather and who'd legally adopted him as his son. John told no one this because it was at once too obvious and too complex. And of no importance, he was sure, to anyone apart from himself.

5.

Had the old man, mortally stricken, sinking to his knees in the wet sand and then falling onto his soft slack bloated old-man's stomach and then onto his face, cried out for help, for help from *him?*—his despised stepson? Had his terror-filled eyes risen to lock themselves to *his?*

And how had John Schroeder, now fully adult, now fully free, having long since forgiven his stepfather for the misery of his childhood, responded to this plea?

Says John, "I spat in the old bastard's face and watched him die."

6.

In his imagination, which had been, since earliest childhood, a fevered imagination, it had seemed that his mother remarried

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shortly after his father's death; so he was puzzled to discover, years later, that a decent interim had passed. You cannot blame a weak woman for marrying a man she doesn't love out of loneliness or financial desperation though of course he blamed her, he'd always hated her, never would he forgive her but he loved her in terror that she too would leave him, understanding even as a child of eight that you can only pity a woman for such craven relief and gratitude. You've heard her weeping and muttering to herself, the very worst times were when she hadn't been drinking but she *had* been praying, her hair disheveled and her face a powdery pasty color and the red lips smeared as if with kisses, the Bible fallen from her hands and too heavy to retrieve. Her name was Miriam, she worked as a receptionist-secretary for Rayburn & Schroeder Realtors Inc. in the little storefront corner office on Main Street. No she wasn't paid much but she was grateful for the job, any job, any kindness, and one of her employers, big good-natured yellow-eyed Jack Schroeder, sometimes drove her home from work, took her out for drinks, for dinner and more drinks, drove her home from work but failed to bring her home . . . and one day they were married; and one day Jack Schroeder who was forty years old, barrel-bodied, big-headed, with big slanted asymmetrical teeth and that wide wet sliding smile and those small bright eyes lit with merriment, or malice, or both, Jack Schroeder in a yellow polka-dot bridegroom's vest and a straw hat with a matching band squatted so he could look his new wife's little boy dead-level in the eyes and gripped the boy's thin shoulders so the boy wouldn't mistake his seriousness, or his strength, and said, "Okay, son, first thing we gotta get straight: *I'm* 'Jack' 'cause I been 'Jack' all my life, everybody knows I'm 'Jack,' so *you're* 'John.' You unnerstand? Eh?" And he'd laughed happily, not at all unkindly, spraying the little boy with a fine mist of saliva, enveloping him with a strong smell of whiskey and cigar smoke and Jack Schroeder's unique and unmistakable aroma. "You unnerstand? Eh?"

7.

Later, he'd called the boy Johnny, just to tease, "Johnny-on-the-spot," he'd say, pinching the boy's cheek between his thumb and forefinger so hard a red mark remained in the flesh for hours, or giving him a cuff on the back of the head, "Johnny-on-the-*pot*, eh?" roaring with laughter at the sight of the boy's perplexed or frightened or terrified face, and as time passed and the boy flinched and

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cringed before he was touched, often as soon as his stepfather entered the room, or his heavy footstep was communicated through the floorboards, he called the boy "Squinchy," which was the most hilarious name of all.

Poised on the brink of sleep he hears it: a sly floating sound, those derisive syllables—"Squinchy."

He feels the sudden grip of the fingers, steely-hard talons closing on his shoulders, his skinny upper arms, the delicate nape of his neck. Knuckles rubbed hard against his scalp, a tattoo of punches in his ribs. "What're ya scared of, Squinchy? Eh? 'Johnny-on-the-pot'?" He hears the explosive wheezing laugh, feels the fine spray of spittle. The smell of beer, whiskey, cigar smoke. The bovine heat of the man. The broad chest that looked as if it were about to burst out of its shirt, the high hard protruding stomach pushing against a fine gleaming silver-buckled belt. "Hey Squinchy, where ya goin'?—what's the hurry? Eh Squinchy?" The bristling hair like quills, the quivering jowls. The flashing wet of the big slanted teeth and the eyes that were urine-colored, lightly threaded with broken capillaries. "Squinchy—how's the boy? Got something in your pants?" If John shrank from his stepfather it was an invitation for the man to lunge at him, swooping in play, clapping his hands in John's face as one might clap his hands at a cowering dog. Several times he clapped his hands hard against John's ears as if hoping to burst his head as one might burst a balloon, in play, of course it was play, and when John whimpered or wept or screamed or reeled in shock, when he coughed, choked, stumbled and fell, a burning vile sludge bubbling through his teeth, Jack Schroeder would stare at him in disgust as if such contemptible behavior were done on purpose to vex *him,* disappoint *him* who had no son of his own of whom he might be proud.

Those years. A lifetime.

And repeatedly as in a dream John's mother said, those years, repeatedly, in reproach, pleading, "Jack is just teasing, honey,—you know he's just teasing," or, "If you could learn not to *cry,* honey, that's what sets him off he just can't bear it," her own arms bruised sometimes as Jack Schroeder's drinking worsened, and that nervous spasm of her eyes as if perpetually in this house they'd been brought to live in she knew she must be on guard, never relax, speak softly, murmur, or mumble out of the side of her mouth, as she had to watch doorways out of the side of her vision, for of course she and her son were living in Jack Schroeder's brick-and-stucco house on

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Elmhurst Avenue on sufferance and not because they deserved to live there; John was now "John Schroeder" because he'd been legally adopted by his stepfather because his stepfather was a damned generous man and not because he deserved to be adopted, a fact everyone knew, who in all of the world could not know, yes and the two of them cost Jack Schroeder money and Jack Schroeder was the kind of man who is most happy spending money in public even giving money away to local charities, master of ceremony at local fund-raising events, president of the Clifton Chamber of Commerce and his photograph in the newspaper in attendance at the Boys' Club or the Consolidated New Jersey Scholarship Fund or the New Jersey Council of Community Services or the Clifton Volunteer Firemen's picnic or Parents Night at the junior high school, a deep sigh and a wide boyish grin and reaching into his pocket for wallet or checkbook. Everyone in Clifton knew Jack Schroeder, everyone in the county knew Jack Schroeder; he was damned generous and good-hearted thus well loved because that's the kind of man he was but he was the kind of man frequently upset and incredulous and crazed in private at the expenditure of money, his hard-earned money, where did it go, where in hell did it go, who were the leeches that were bleeding him white—"bleeding me white" was a favorite expression—and behind closed doors in the house on Elmhurst Avenue at any hour of the day including even the early morning before John could slip away trembling to school there might rise Jack Schroeder's indignant voice and of Miriam no sound except perhaps muffled sobs, the faintest and most futile of protests, the sound of shame, the sound of craven female pleading, the sound of the most ignominious and complete defeat: the very erasure of the human soul.

8.

There was Curly the golden-red cocker spaniel pup someone had given Jack Schroeder, Curly who was to be John's pet and John's responsibility, how he'd loved Curly poor doomed Curly who was his first pet and would be his last, the creature kept in the basement whimpering and whining all night long and why wasn't he housebroken after two weeks, and Jack Schroeder took matters into his own hands since Johnny clearly couldn't, or wouldn't, the boy was eleven years old and in sixth grade and shy and silent and weak-eyed but there was a grain of stubbornness in him Jack Schroeder could detect since lately he'd learned not to cry unless severely

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frightened or made to endure true pain, nor did he visibly flinch when made to witness the puppy's "discipline": the measured blows with a rolled-up newspaper, in time the blows of balled-up fists, finally kicks so the small furry body flew about the basement like a football and even its screams were swallowed up in sheer animal horror. Naturally at such times Curly dribbled urine and feces onto the cement floor; panting, Jack Schroeder observed in a voice heavy with sarcasm, "—You just look at the little bugger cross-eyed and he *shits,*" and ordered Johnny to clean it up, and Johnny cleaned it up, and the blood too, and when he tried to comfort Curly, when he tried simply to touch him, the puppy shrank from him convulsed in terror, his eyes the eyes of unseeing madness, the eyes of impending death, until finally in the puppy's fifth week in the Schroeder house Jack Schroeder initiated the strategy of punishing Curly for his misdeeds by rationing out food and water as meagerly as possible, his logic being, "If the little bugger doesn't take it in, he sure can't piss and shit it out," and this turned out to be true.

Long after the dog died John would hear him whimpering in the basement, lying tense and sweaty in his bed he could hear Curly two floors below as he'd heard him those nights, except now covering his head with a pillow didn't help and even today so many years later he can wake from a dream to hear the puppy whining, his claws on the cement floor clicking in desperation to escape, but of course there was no escape; no escape from Jack Schroeder's wrath and the profound righteousness of that wrath.

And there came a day, an hour, weeks after John and his mother had buried Curly near the back fence of Jack Schroeder's property on Elmhurst Avenue, when Jack Schroeder cheerfully denied the puppy's existence: "Naw, nobody in *this* house ever had a dog—what kind of a dog? Too much yapping and fussing"—turning his cigar in his fingers, sucking at it unlit, one eyelid drooping in his familiar wink as he turned toward John's mother drawling, "Right, Mir'im? Eh? Never any dog around here, eh?" as John's mother stood smiling faintly, her powdered skin stretched in just-perceptible horizontal planes on her thin face, her eyes averted. So Jack Schroeder repeated his question as if making an effort to be patient with someone very stupid, "Right, Mir'im? Tell Johnny-boy what's the score," until at last, reluctantly, shamefully, John's mother shook her head, swallowed, murmuring, the very murmur of female submission and female defeat, "Oh I—I don't know."

The house on Elmhurst Avenue. Those years.

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9.

They became lovers, so naturally she asked him where was his home, who were his people, and he told her that his relatives, those still living, lived in Clifton, New Jersey, but that he saw them rarely. Managing then to change the subject, to deflect her innocent line of questioning, so that Laurel was left with the vague impression that both John's parents were dead; and it wasn't until two years later when they were making plans to marry that the odd fact emerged, as if accidentally, that John's mother Miriam was living after all; living less than three hundred miles away.

Laurel was perplexed, Laurel was disoriented, regarding John with wondering eyes, and several times saying, to his annoyance, "But—your mother *is* living? But—" so John felt obliged to say, as tactfully as possible, "Yes. My mother is 'living.' But that hasn't much to do with me; and nothing at all to do with you, has it?"

10.

He'd been drawn to her because, he saw, other men of whom he'd heard impressive things had been drawn to her too.

The way she carried herself, and the way she spoke, and the way light seemed to irradiate from her skin. Her fair wavy hair, her intelligent eyes. He concluded that she was beautiful, and she was desirable. He felt emotion in her presence but it was not a definable emotion, thus not trustworthy, thus left to himself he would not have been so certain that he wanted her and must have her to complete, not himself, but his idea of himself.

He recalled with some dreamy difficulty that his mother had been an attractive woman once, a wan faltering watercolor-pretty woman, otherwise lip-licking Jack Schroeder that fat tub of guts Jack Schroeder would not have wanted her and would not have elected to take on the burden, as he would subsequently, and frequently, complain, of "another man's leavings": the widow, and the brat.

11.

There was the basement stinking of a puppy's bowel-panic but there was the basement of other days, and nights, as well: a shadowy place: an almost sacred place: the place of "discipline": the place of which you did not think.

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Jack Schroeder saying, not in his usual high-pitched or aggrieved voice, but calmly, "C'mere. Take down your pants."

12.

He was an architect with a small but elite firm in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He was an architect, which meant that he was a master of space.

He'd left home permanently at the age of sixteen to live with a great-uncle in Newark, New Jersey, he'd worked after school and summers to pay room and board and then he'd gone to Rutgers University in New Brunswick on a scholarship and from there to Yale to study architecture, a life-summary he'd become glibly accustomed to reciting as if it were an account of someone else's life and not his. For what of it, of its exteriority, was in fact *his*?—in *his* head, most of the time, there were elegant spatial designs, ghost-structures, to be painstakingly translated into visual terms and set down on clean white paper.

His most recent project, the subject of a feature in a national newsmagazine, was an art museum in Tucson, Arizona. Tall tinted panels of glass and starkly white walls including adjustable interior walls and a roof designed like an immense venetian blind whose slats could be adjusted to modulate degrees of light; the beautiful airy structure had begun in John's imagination as a dream of light, a phenomenon of sheer light, and it was as this, wholly devoid of content or use, that John had willed it into being.

But it was a success in worldly, public terms, if just slightly controversial. By way of such terms the name Schroeder would be enhanced.

As soon as John and Laurel entered the elder Schroeders' living room on Thursday evening John spied, conspicuous on a coffee table, the weeks'-old issue of the glossy newsmagazine, and he felt his mouth twitch in a wry little grimace. And shortly afterward his mother Miriam alluded to the feature, opened the magazine to display it, as, no doubt, she'd opened the magazine to display the feature numerous times (had she friends? women friends? had she a life, now? in these "retirement" years?), murmuring, ". . . So proud of you, dear! And so surprised!" peering almost shyly at John through the subtly distorting lenses of her bifocal glasses, and there was John's stepfather Jack smiling too, nodding vehemently, old-mannish, his small watery eyes moving uneasily from John's face to Laurel's to John's as if he could not quite recall which of these

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two attractive and composed young people was *his.* But his very white dentures gleamed wetly and happily. He said, "Sure *are!*" tugging the magazine out of Miriam's fingers with childlike dispatch, scarcely noticing what he did, any more than Miriam seemed to notice it, and flapping the magazine down on his fattish thighs, boasting, "*I* was the one who spotted it here, not your mama, John, wasn't I, Mir'im? Eh?"

Miriam, making an effort to smile, smoothing her skirt across her lap with careful hands, alleged, yes, he was.

13.

How obscene, the word "mama" in that man's mouth.

How unreal this life of theirs, the two of them together in this semblance of domesticity, no longer in the house on Elmhurst Avenue which had been sold long ago, but in a redwood ranch house on five acres of land outside Clifton—Jack Schroeder's retirement home. John knew from Miriam that in the 1970s the real-estate company had nearly gone bankrupt, forced out of competition by younger, more vigorous, presumably more capable rivals; he knew that Jack Schroeder had had to sell off a good deal of the local property he'd acquired, and that he was no longer one of the prominent men in the area though he remained active, still; in local politics—since giving up real estate he'd become increasingly involved in the Republican party, in whatever local or county capacity they would have him. He no longer drank, nor did he smoke. It seemed clear to John that he was wary of *him*—blustery and bossy and sarcastic as ever when alone with Miriam, but immediately and innocently affable, even fawning, when John or Laurel appeared. He'd draw himself up to his fullest height—he was still a big man: no less than six feet tall, and massive in the chest and belly—and grin his boyish slanted grin, and say, "Y'know I was just telling Mir'im here—" cagily assessing John or blinking as if dazzled by Laurel, these strangers in his house who were in some vague way *his:* to deal with, to measure, perhaps even (who knows?) to exploit. Certainly he had numerous questions to ask of John about an architect's "millionaire clients."

And there was Miriam, John's mother, who'd written to him and Laurel to invite them to visit, performing the old housewifely duties like a smiling automaton, with oddly few questions of her own, content seemingly just to gaze upon her son and smile, and smile. As John stared at her thinking *Why? Why didn't you protect me from*

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him? Why are you still with him? What is this life of yours, how can you endure it? Why didn't you take me away?—the two of us, away?—anywhere?—to save ourselves? Why? Aging, Miriam had acquired a brittle look. As if her bones beneath the envelope of thin taut faintly shiny skin might easily break. She had a distracting habit of clearing her throat frequently, bringing her hand to her mouth, as if to hide her mouth. John wondered was she frightened of him: of her son suddenly taking her hands in his, forcing her to see him, to acknowledge their connection: *Why?*

But of course John would never do that. He would not want to upset his mother, he wasn't the kind of person to dramatize himself at another's expense. Oh never!

By his calculation he hadn't touched his mother in any urgent way in twenty-eight years.

Laurel, lovely shrewd Laurel, sensed these tensions but gave no sign, behaving, to John's amazement, in splendid daughterly fashion —doing most of the talking with Miriam, conspiring to be alone with Miriam, resisting Jack Schroeder's clumsy efforts at banter that excluded Miriam or seemed to have Miriam as its butt. She insisted that she was enjoying the visit. She insisted that she liked John's mother, what a sweet woman, rather effaced by her husband, but intelligent really—"I can see so much of you in her," Laurel said several times.

Carefully John asked, "In our features, or in our personalities?"

Laurel said vaguely, "I'm not sure. Some amalgam, I suppose, of both."

14.

The house in which his mother and stepfather now lived was a cheaply flashy "ranch," but the other house was the true house, the house of memory, pain, repetition. Vividly John could see the rooms of that house—the staircase, the upstairs hall, the bathroom with its old-fashioned fixtures, the tub that stained so easily, and so repeatedly, which poor Miriam had to scrub, scrub, scrub. . . . Vividly he could see the kitchen of that old house. A wanly golden light of late afternoon slanting through the windows. And downstairs in the basement that same light eerily refracted or dimmed by the scrim of dust on the windows. Such narrow windows they were, dwarf windows measuring perhaps eighteen inches by ten, too small for even a thin-boned child to climb through. Though more than once, locked in for the night, having endured his "discipline," he'd dragged

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a rickety chair over to one of the windows to stand on, to peer out.

Nothing to see even in daylight except grass, dirt, rubble. As if in a grave. But still he'd stand there, peering out.

Always the command was, "Take down your pants, boy."

"Take" down and not "pull" down: why?

And next day when they were alone together in no immediate danger of being caught his mother would whisper, half in reproach, "If you could *cry*, John. Like you used to. He thinks you're taunting him, you never *cry*."

15.

Had John Schroeder planned to kill his stepfather Jack Schroeder, or was it, the sudden expedient action at the lake, wholly unpremeditated?—he would wonder, himself. Oh yes! He'd wonder.

Certainly he was, of all the men and women of his acquaintance, professional as well as social, the most premeditated of people; the most icy-calm; the most unsentimentally self-aware. He was certain there could be nothing about himself of which he was not aware—not because he'd had a few intermittent years of therapy in his late twenties but because it was his nature to be scrupulously self-analytic. Had he been a painter instead of an architect he would have painted self-portraits of the most exacting pitiless kind.

"How hard you are on yourself!" Laurel said.

"Not hard enough, surely," said John.

He knew, for instance, that there exists in the human psyche the temptation to forever cast one's life in the form of a narrative in which all others are supporting characters: there is the temptation to believe in the delusion of one's centrality: one's supreme importance.

He thought, bemused, Not me. That was beaten out of me long ago.

And so it was. Of that he was certain.

16.

Saturday morning and according to news bulletins the hurricane had blown out harmlessly to sea and Jack Schroeder was anxiously eager to inspect his property at Lake Chinquapin: for hours, the previous day, he'd talked of little else. "I think Jack is a bit obsessive about this, don't you?" John asked Miriam, speaking as if sympathetic, but Miriam only said, circumspectly, "Well. It's what he has to think about."

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So John naturally offered to drive out with him. To drive him, in fact. In John's new-model Toyota which Jack had made a show of admiring though he disapproved in general of "foreign" cars.

Thinking, as he drove, half-listening to his stepfather's rambling and not entirely coherent monologue, that there was no risk: he'd never do what he most wanted to do simply because he most wanted it and what we most want we must deny ourselves forever.

17.

"Remember Squinchy?"

"Eh? What?"

"Squinchy. Remember?"

"Who? What's that?"

He'd heard, and he knew. John could tell by the way Jack stiffened in his seat and by the diminution of his voice.

"And Curly—d'you remember Curly?"

"Curly?"

"The puppy. The cocker spaniel. You know."

Jack Schroeder worked his mouth, sucked at his dentures and seemed to be considering how to reply, or whether to reply at all. They were nearly at Lake Chinquapin and the storm damage was considerable along the highway: fallen tree limbs, several abandoned cars, sections of the road swamped with muddy water to a depth of about six inches.

"The puppy. Curly. Don't you remember?—I do." John paused, looking straight ahead. He'd thought the wind had died down but the tops of the trees were disturbed, quivering. "The puppy you let die."

"I—don't remember."

"The puppy you killed."

"Eh? Puppy? I don't remember no puppy."

He'd heard and he knew but cagily he cupped a hand to his left ear and leaned toward John, his gaze veiled.

John said casually, "Well. Never mind, Jack."

They drove on. Pale impacted sunshine seemed to glare from all sides. A sign announced three miles to the village of Lake Chinquapin which, to get to John's stepfather's place, they would be bypassing.

Jack Schroeder snuffled and cleared his throat and mumbled, in the awkward silence, "Never was any dog in our house I can remember, your mama said they made her nervous. She *is* high-strung,

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y'know." And, when John still did not reply, nor even acknowledge having heard, he added, "*My* daddy hated 'em."

18.

John Schroeder had been trained as a lifeguard at the age of sixteen so naturally he would know the technique of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation and he'd have been certain to try it when his stepfather collapsed on the beach at Lake Chinquapin, if only for a few futile minutes.

Then he'd driven to the village and telephoned an ambulance and returned at once to the stricken man, which was where the ambulance crew found him: crouched over Jack Schroeder's body which lay flat on its back on the debris-littered beach. John rose and said quietly, "My stepfather—I think he's dead."

19.

He will remember the flat slap of the waves, and the oily light gleaming on the waves, froth like human spittle or semen and a great bobbing net of seed-scum and storm debris of all kinds, parts of boards, Styrofoam cups and containers, the carcass of a partly decomposed rat: and the vivid smells of these things: and the air warm and moist as breath: and he'll remember the lake's stillness and the expanse of water approximately a mile and a half wide looking out from the beach below Jack Schroeder's cottage but he won't clearly remember himself standing there for what must have been minutes and these minutes hardly placid, his right foot in its corrugated crepe-soled canvas shoe pressing down hard on a man's neck pressing a man's face hard into the sand until at last the man's heart bursts and the convulsive flailing of arms and legs and the muffled terrified cries end. He will try, but he can't quite remember.

In the end, he'll be forced to invent.

20.

He was shaking so badly he couldn't continue driving, falling behind the speeding ambulance until finally, chill with sweating inside his clothes, he turned off the road and stopped at a café. That was what the place called itself: Nickel's Café.

He drank two cups of coffee, bitter and black. And a glass of ice water. His nerves, severed, needed knitting-up again, coherence. A woman dressed as a waitress spoke to him patiently and repeated her question once or twice before he heard.

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He stammered, "What? Yes? —I've just seen a man die."

Before leaving Nickel's Café he telephoned his mother. When she answered the phone, saying "Hello?" in a timid, hopeful voice, a voice he would not have recognized, he identified himself and asked to speak to Laurel, it was only to Laurel he could speak, his eyes shut, his heart painful in his chest, saying quickly, before Laurel could draw breath to ask if something was wrong, "My stepfather—I think he's dead."

There came a beat, a moment's silence. Laurel said faintly, "—Dead?"

"I think—I think he is. Yes I think he is. He collapsed at the lake, he was upset seeing the damage to the, the dock and the cottage, it must have been his heart, I couldn't do anything for him so I called an ambulance and they're taking him—" but by now they'd already taken him, surely—"to the hospital in Mt. Royal. I—I couldn't—I tried but I couldn't—" And his voice trailed off in astonishment.

Laurel was saying, "Your stepfather—Jack—is dead? He's actually *dead?*"

"Bring my mother and I'll meet you at the hospital. You can drive their car, can't you? Jack's car? Prepare her for the shock but don't tell her, you know, don't tell her he's—dead—that is, I think he's dead, I think—" as the horror of it washed over him, that, in fact, the man might yet be resuscitated at the hospital, retrieved from death, "—Just bring her, Laurel, and I'll meet you there." He paused, breathing quickly. A sensation as of neon light flooded his veins—brilliant and without warmth.

Laurel said tentatively, "John—? Are you all right?"

He said, "I don't know. I don't know yet."

There was silence. Then they spoke again, hurriedly, and made arrangements to meet at the Mt. Royal hospital, and hung up.

In any case, Jack Schroeder was not resuscitated.

21.

There was a funeral, and there was a burial, and a surprising number of Clifton residents came to pay their last respects to Jack Schroeder, most of them older men: men of Jack Schroeder's generation. The younger Schroeders made most of the arrangements, or helped Miriam, who was bearing up under the shock with unexpected fortitude, for after all, as she said repeatedly, in a thin vague wondering voice, her husband had had warnings, their doctor had

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strongly advised him to lose weight, not to get overly excited or lose his temper yes and he'd strained his heart with so many years of drinking and smoking, poor Jack, poor stubborn Jack, you know how he is—how he *was*.

"Yes," said John. "I know."

Which may or may not have been the truth.

And after ten days the younger Schroeders drove back home to Massachusetts, having made plans for Miriam to come visit them at Christmas, and with relief John returned to work, he returned to work with a passion for wasn't his work his solace? his truest self? an island of sorts of which he was the sole inhabitant until such time as he relinquished it to other, subsequent inhabitants, who were, regardless of the prices they paid for the privilege, required to live within the restrictions he'd invented?

22.

Softly he'd said, "I'm going to kill you: wipe you out like wiping something foul off my shoes."

Softly he'd said, "No, Jack, of course I've forgiven you, isn't that what adults do, forgive one another for the crimes they've committed against children?"

His stepfather had not heard, or had heard. He'd gone red in the face, and his breath was coming in spasms, and when he sank to his knees stunned then fell heavily forward onto his stomach and onto his face it's possible that he was already dead or so bound for death that John's sudden foot on the nape of his beefy neck urging his face into the sand with the hope of smothering him (for is not smothering of all strategies of homicide the most difficult to detect? diagnosed usually as "cardiac failure"?) was unnecessary: except as a final gesture.

Revenge is secret justice yes but it *is* justice.

And if the dead man's face seemed to have been oddly mashed in the sand, if there were bruises and lacerations on the skin, even the back of the neck showing evidence of abrasion, that could be readily explained for he'd had convulsions, his death had not been an easy one, he'd fought it for minutes and fought even his stepson's attempt to save him. . . .

But no one at the hospital, nor, certainly, Miriam Schroeder, asked for a detailed explanation, only for an account: the death by "cardiac failure" of a man of nearly seventy with health problems, overweight by forty pounds, is hardly a medical mystery.

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Softly he'd said, crouched over the man, pleading, begging, "God damn you, get up, do you think I believe this, do you think I believe you—*you*? Do you think you can make me believe you're dead?"

23.

It was winter, and very cold, and hand in hand like young or convalescent lovers they were walking somewhere, their booted feet sinking crisply into the snow, breaking the icy crust of snow, and John seemed to be favoring his right foot, not limping precisely but wincing when his weight came down on that foot, and Laurel, sharp-eyed Laurel asked was something wrong? and John said no, not really, just pins and needles in his foot as if it's been asleep, a mild numbness, the sort of thing that comes and goes and if it's a circulation problem it's a very minor problem—"Nothing I'm going to worry about, right now."

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a ***NEW*** short story by

JEFFRY SCOTT

"The sad truth I'm trying to convey," says the narrator of "A Helping Hand," "is that the former Turnham Bee is a typical, late-twentieth century English village, Lord help us—pretty much the same as the towns and cities, only smaller. Incurious and impersonal in the main."

Perhaps—but we think you'll agree that Jeffry Scott has still managed to concoct a splendid version of the English-village cozy. . .

A HELPING HAND

by JEFFRY SCOTT

Dilly, bless her, is nobody's idea of a wild-eyed political activist. If the late Czar of Russia had seen Dilys Hatton-Pryce striding up the drive to the Winter Palace, he would not have gone ashen and cried, "Alas, the revolution begins!" No, the supreme ruler would have deduced that my neighbor wanted to borrow a cup of sugar from the Czarina or have a chat about Faberge eggs.

So when Dilly exclaimed, "All the politicians need stringing up, *and* those greedy bosses who sack hundreds of people, then turn around and award themselves whopping great pay rises," it startled me.

"Ned Fitten is a politician," I objected. "Could you reprieve him until next week? He's bringing me some wallflower plants on Friday." Ned is a local farmer, or rather he used to be. Recently he raised a splendid cash crop of bungalows on the forty-acre and retired to full-time pottering. Ned's other hobby is running Turnham Blazie parish council.

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Women often tell me I have never grown up. Admittedly, blameless ladies of what the French term "uncertain age" bring out the nursery tease in me. "You know what I mean," Dilly snapped. "Real politicians, the Whitehall kind, doing such terrible things to England."

Now her outburst made more sense. One deplores chauvinism, but it must be said that Britain still leads the world in certain activities. For instance, when it comes to a thumping good recession, we take some beating . . .

The current slump had to be bad, for Dilly to notice. She is the only child of a chap who made twice as much money as his father and left it to her. *His* dad was a millionaire. In the arcane jargon of merchant banking, Ms. Hatton-Pryce ain't hurting a bit. Then again, the recession is hitting even backwaters like Turnham Blazie. That acrid smell comes not from bonfires but neighborhood business ventures which have crashed and burned.

I put the cards down—she'd come around for our regular canasta game—and tried changing the subject. But Dilly scorned the chance to consider England's cricketers' stubborn refusal to be any good at the national game. Plan B, a sermon against greenfly with digressions on the dietary habits of snails, got her foot tapping within seconds.

"Robert, stop being so . . . so *footling.*" Lovely word rhyming with root rather than foot and standing for ignoble pettiness. "Father used to talk about the Great Depression, how terrible it was. And I read modern history at university. But I knew nothing. It's not just being out of work, money is the least of it. People . . . go wrong, it's like some terrible illness that changes them."

"Ah," I thought to myself, profoundly. *"Aha."*

This might be her indirect reference to the Caseys, Annette and Tom. They were relative newcomers to the village; nearly everybody is. Tom was one of the youngest sales managers in the country, Annette had been a model. Dilly lives at The Old Rectory, a Georgian house demonstrating that some bygone clergymen did themselves remarkably well, never mind the rich-man-needle's-eye stuff. (The new rectory, built in the 1970s, is a ticky-tacky box with a fingernail of garden, near enough the railway line for Mrs. Rector to touch passing trains if she leaned out of her kitchen window.) Anyway, the stables at Dilly's place converted into a handsome cottage, where the Caseys had lived for three years or so.

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Tom and wife weren't my kind of folk. I prefer fish-and-chips personalities—touches of salt and vinegar. The Caseys were yoghurt, a trifle bland. Ms. Hatton-Pryce evidently liked yoghurt and they didn't mind an honorary aunt as nearest neighbor. There had been much visiting back and forth, London theater outings, small, shared treats of all varieties. Annette even persuaded Dilly to try aerobics, and Dilly values her dignity highly.

But something changed all that, some months before Dilly's call for the summary execution of every Member of Parliament. She and the Caseys stopped being seen together, she stopped mentioning them. I speculated, only half seriously, over what had caused the climate to cool. Tom Casey making a pass at Dilly? Annette using the wrong fish knife during dinner at the Old Rectory?

Until, accidentally, I'd learned the probable reason.

And for the first time since returning to Turnham Blazie, I was glad that the place had changed so much. Once, the village would have revelled in the situation, laughing at Dilly as a spinster who'd had her nose rubbed in the facts of life. There would have been constant, covertly impudent signals from locals anxious to show that they knew what she knew. When I was growing up in Turnham Bee—nobody uses that nickname any more, never having heard it—privacy was minimal and gossip pervasive.

The sad truth I'm striving to convey is that the former Turnham Bee is a typical, late-twentieth century English village, Lord help us—pretty much the same as the towns and cities, only smaller. Incurious and impersonal in the main: filled with horny-handed masters of traditional crafts such as computer programming or managing supermarkets. No jolly farmers (Ned Fitten doesn't count, his jollity springs from being an ex-farmer). What remains are agribusinessmen harvesting ulcers and intoning wise country sayings like, "Red sky at morning, tax havens a-borning." They drench the land with chemicals and absolutely detest milking and all that stuff.

I'm probably the oldest inhabitant of Turnham Blazie and even that is a cheat; I left at eighteen and returned at sixty. Real villagers don't live here; they can't afford the houses. The old general store is a video library, but we do have a curry place, Ye Olde Thatched Vindaloo. There are two shops, both selling antiques. Yours Ago caters to those who covet ancient horse-brasses made in Birmingham the day before yesterday. Forge Bygones is also known, in an unkind joke (mine) as Forgery Bygones. Its proprietor, Victor Bingle, was an alchemist. Lead to gold was beyond him, but give

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him Victorian furniture and it aged generations overnight. I exaggerate; it took the abominable Bingle at least a week. Some idiots are pleased to think of all the above-mentioned as progress. . . .

Dilly Hatton-Pryce took up that theme, after demanding summary execution of MPs and branding me as footling. "Half the trouble is, this isn't a proper village," she sighed. "So many people in trouble at the moment, and nobody rallies round."

"Hard to do much rallying-round on your ownsome," I suggested.

Dilly frowned at me. "Stop being facetious, Noel Coward was much better at it. You know exactly what I mean. People under pressure, without resources to fall back on, spiritual or material. No wonder that they—" She chopped that line of thought short, and went red.

"Satan finds work for idle hands to do?"

"Hands weren't the body parts I had in mind," she said dryly. Dilly projects a lavender-and-old-lace image but every so often the World War Two version, a D. Hatton-Pryce who was a Women's Royal Air Force officer and must have lived a little, flaws it. "Adultery is so messy. Don't make any vulgar jokes, I mean that infidelity rips the social fabric."

"Sex does put common sense to flight."

"That's very true." She looked stricken. "Mine, for a start. I was so . . . taken aback, nonplussed . . . I flew off the handle, and now it's too late to recover. She won't trust me. Well, trust hardly comes into it, I said terrible things. Out of embarrassment, really, moral outrage was only the pretext. I was angry for that poor boy. Only now I think, poor girl as well, poor both of them."

Time for careful lies. "I haven't an inkling what you are on about, dear. I'd rather not find out, thanks."

Dilly colored again. "Nor will you, from me! It's just . . . none of this would have happened if everybody had jobs. I wish those wretched men in grey suits who pretend to run the country understood the true price of the recession."

I had a vision of Dilly Hatton-Pryce in her veteran yet timeless Dior suit with the Hermes scarf, marching into 10 Downing Street to read the Right Honourable John Major the riot act. Did the prime minister realise that the economy threatened a lovely young couple's marriage?

The way of it was this: six months ago, Tom Casey stopped being the youngest sales manager, when his firm went bust. He signed on with seven different executive placement agencies, wrote more than

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a hundred letters, was rewarded with fifteen interviews, and could not get work. (Dilly was still in daily contact with the Caseys at that time, and they had no secrets from her. She believed.)

Within five weeks—kids take on financial responsibilities with a blitheness that would turn my hair white, if it weren't already—Tom Casey could not pay his mortgage. The building society agreed to take interest payments only, for a limited period, and even that sum was a problem. Property values having slumped, the Caseys could neither afford to sell the cottage, nor stay in it.

Tom fought back. He'd come across an anti-theft device for cars—something about the electrical system shutting down unless the ignition key was turned in a combination lock. Quite cheap, it wasn't selling well, through being so fiddly to fit. He bought several hundred of the gadgets (I expect Dilly made him an interest-free loan, for he had no capital) and started peddling them door to door. Young Casey was a dull but proud fellow, the kind born middle-aged and pompous. But status be damned, he made no secret of his work. I'd see the station wagon parked at the foot of some drive, tailgate up to disclose a neatly painted sign: T. CASEY VEHICLE SECURITY—Foil Thieves—I Come To You—24-HOURS SERVICE.

Dilly reported that he was doing well enough, in a modest way. But it must have irked Annette, who was a bit, a large bit actually, of a snob. Still, Tom's wife bit the bullet too, and got a job. My hackles, though I'm not sure an extensively bald old buffer can be said to own hackles, rose at the sight of Annette and her new boss.

Because she became salesperson-aide to Victor Bingle at Forge Bygones. If Annette was a bit of a snob, then our Vic was a bit of a joke—but only to other men. He was a wiry, heavily lined little cove with pimp's eyes and an aura making even liberal, civilised New Men nostalgic for the time when cads and bounders got horse-whipped.

Women loved Vic Bingle, though. He was a five-star, no-class twirp, but he listened when they talked, and he made them laugh. For Annette to be in his company for several hours a day, five and a half days a week, seemed tantamount to presenting a German shepherd with a dish of freshly minced beef while murmuring the virtues of a vegetarian regimen. Despite the aspirations, the outcome is a fix.

I saw the aftermath of that outcome for myself. I was taking a short cut home through the parking lot behind our village pub, The Healthy Thirst, when I stumbled on Tom Casey shaking Victor Bin-

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gle warmly by the throat, shouting, "Don't even look at her again, or I'll kill you!" The dialogue struck one as a trifle skewed, since Tom appeared to be making a spirited attempt to kill him anyway.

So I took the irate husband by the hand, having pried it off the randy antique dealer's neck, and chirped, "Time we were going, old son, he's got the gist of your remarks."

Tom Casey had other ideas, but then he gasped and came stumbling along beside me. I was using a simple grip, ideal for frail old buffers like myself: you fold the subject's middle three fingers in your fist and squeeze for all you're worth. After a hundred yards, it put him in a calmer frame of mind. "I say, that really hurts."

"It's meant to." But I released him.

He flexed his hand, rubbing it ruefully. "Sorry about . . . the scene back there. Bingle and I were arguing about, um, soccer. I got carried away, never realised I had a temper to lose."

"Better control it," I advised, "else you may get carried away by a police van, next time." Prophetic words.

Annette Casey stopped working at the antique shop. Being the noticing sort (i.e., a compulsive snoop with nothing better to do), I duly noticed Vic Bingle's car parked in Rectory Lane on more than one sultry summer afternoon, following Annette's resignation. I doubted whether he was visiting Dilly Hatton-Pryce. And the Caseys' cottage was the only other dwelling reached by that lane.

Then came the mysterious severing of diplomatic relations between Dilly and the Caseys, followed by Dilly's cryptic talk to me. Bingle, active as ever, took up with a teenage unmarried mother in Steeple Oaks, the next village. Working things out from available evidence, I concluded that he and Annette had been having an affair. Tom Casey suspected but could not prove the fact—had he been sure, then Vic Bingle wouldn't still be with us . . . However, the affair continued after Tom's outburst, with Bingle sneaking in to the marital home behind his back. Dilly Hatton-Pryce had discovered the liaison—probably by dropping in on Annette, unannounced, and catching the pair in *flagrante*.

That had been enough to frighten or shame Annette Casey out of cheating. It would have shaken Vic Bingle, too. Dilly is influential, wealthy people in villages are bound to be, whether or not they wish for power. Bingle must have seen her as a bad enemy, and opted for the next popsy.

Vic Bingle's was not the only car I had seen in the wrong place, which added an ironic savor to the stillborn scandal. I am too long

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in the tooth to be surprised by double standards, but they never cease to tickle me.

The whole thing had been a teacup-storm with possibilities of developing into a full-scale hurricane, a disaster. No chance of that now; it was all over.

Except that it wasn't . . . Towards autumn, somebody killed Victor Bingle. It happened at about half-past two in the afternoon, because when his body was discovered at a quarter to three, the blood was still wet. He had been attacked in his shop by somebody who snatched up a heavy brass poker and smashed him on the head, repeatedly.

Tom Casey was stopped on the road between Steeple Oaks and Turnham Blazie, some three hours later. Heading home from selling car alarms on the far side of the county, *he* claimed. They didn't arrest him, but he was kept at County Police headquarters in the market town, to help with enquiries. Tom was still helping, the following day.

So I took myself off for a chat with Superintendent Tidd. Time for the helper to be helped; I was fairly sure that Tom Casey, while far from an innocent, wasn't the guilty man, either.

I have known Jack Tidd for many years. He isn't a bad chap—as coppers go.

When I was shown in, he turned to Inspector Lamport and grunted, "That's a five you owe me." And to me, "I bet him you would stick your nose in, sooner rather than later."

"Silver-tongued as ever, Jack. 'Morning, Mr. Lamport. Thank you, I will take a seat. Look, speak no ill of the dead, but Victor Bingle never saw a nice bosom or good pair of legs he didn't like. The man was a serial womaniser, he must have had scores of enemies. Husbands, fathers, brothers, not forgetting women with good reasons to give him forty whacks. Why pick on Tom Casey? I never heard a whisper that his wife and Bingle were anything but, very briefly, boss and employee. Casual acquaintances."

Jack Tidd gave me a crafty look. At least, I thought he did. He's no oil painting, the superintendent, and the squint makes it hard to decide what his look implies, let alone where it is aimed. "That's strange, you being behind on the continuing story of Turnham Blazie, Colonel. The deceased and Mrs. Casey were lovers, right enough. Going at it like knives, for half a year or more. Then he gave her

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the elbow. But not before Annette Casey's husband assaulted Bingle and threatened his life."

"Sounds like a village fairy tale to me," I bluffed. My friend Dilly had taken herself off to Canada for an extended vacation. A very Dilly solution to a problem. Unwilling to lie to save Tom Casey's neck, she would do her utmost to avoid testifying against him. Without Dilly's evidence, and providing husband and wife kept their traps shut, Annette's affair with Bingle, and therefore Tom's motive for murder, could be mere hearsay. "Who spun you that silly yarn?"

Lamport answered that. "The deceased did. You're a man of the world, Colonel Bob. Maybe you would agree that woman-chasers, consciously or otherwise, dislike women. I think the woman Victor Bingle most disliked was his wife. Ever meet the lady?"

Yes, I had. Molly Bingle was . . . well, not pretty, but bonny, one generally felt better for setting eyes on her. Lord knows how she had stuck frightful Vic for so long. Whenever meeting Molly, I wanted to pat her head and give her a toffee. Rising fifty, she retained a pleasantly childlike quality.

Jack Tidd, seeing my expression, nodded slowly. "Too good for her own good, Molly is. Bingle led her a hell of a life. The philandering was bad enough, but he was a confessor. After every fling, he told Mrs. B about it. Chapter and verse, no details spared. He told her all about Annette Casey, naturally. And how Tom Casey blew his top at another fellow even showing interest in his wife.

"The affair is history, admittedly. But the very fact that it took place gives Mr. Casey a strong motive," said Tidd. "Casey isn't helping himself. A pack of lies about his whereabouts at the time of the killing, stubborn refusal to tell us where he really was yesterday afternoon."

Seeing that strike home, Inspector Lamport asked, "Still making your patrols of the perimeter, Colonel Bob? Come on, you used to be one of us. If you know anything, it's your duty to pass it on."

Lamport's an impudent ruffian. I walk a lot, am observant by training and nature, live in Turnham Blazie, so where else would I do my rambling? "I was a colonial policeman, a hundred years ago," I said sourly. "Thrashing oppressed victims of capitalist exploitation when I felt liverish isn't anything like CID work."

Squinting harder than ever, Jack Tidd scoffed, "Pull the other one, you were a thief-taker all right. Different patch to us, Africa and South Pacific islands and that, but the selfsame work."

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"Very well, bring me up to speed, and if I can contribute anything, then I will."

Superintendent Tidd nodded to Lamport, who explained: "Casey said he was on the knocker over towards the Bristol side of the county all day. You know how he works. If he sees a new car parked in front of a house, he tries his luck at selling that gadget.

"Now, when Mr. Casey started this lark, we checked his antecedents. Standard procedure when anyone wants to sell security equipment—it can be perfect cover for scouting houses to burgle. But Mr. Casey seems just what he purports to be, chap who got fired through no fault of his own, respectable background. The Force can't solicit business for private traders, obviously, but Casey offers a good, inexpensive service, so the crime-prevention officers may well mention his name when asked about protecting cars. Most of them know him, in other words.

"I'm only telling you this because Casey says he worked—" Inspector Lamport checked his notebook "—the following areas from 9 A.M. until 4.30 P.M. yesterday: Graddich, Long Ferney, Little Hefford, and Great Hefford.

"A couple of Graddich residents confirm he sold them the gadget and fitted it. So much for the morning. He claims to have tried several houses in the Heffords during the afternoon, failing to make sales. Can't remember a single address he tried, though. Snag is that our Sergeant Dace was running a crime-prevention display at Great Hefford that afternoon. It's not a big town. If Casey had been in the area, Dace would have spotted him, since he knows the man and his car—but Dace didn't."

"Casey is lying," said Superintendent Tidd, needlessly. "The sort of off-the-cuff tale a man produces when he's at his wits end for an alibi. The killing was an impulse thing. I doubt whether Tom Casey—all right, Casey or a person unknown—planned it. Chance, not design, let them enter and leave Bingle's shop without being seen. Casey's nonsensical alibi is all of a piece with that."

I pondered awhile. The honorable man risking a murder charge sooner than smirch a lady's name always struck me as thin, even when reading whodunits as a schoolboy. On the other hand, Tom Casey might be just enough of a twit to embrace the cliche.

Tidd grinned when I agreed, "It does seem that he is hiding something." It faded as I added, "But my bet is he wasn't bouncing a poker off Bingle's skull yesterday. If you must know, he warned Vic to stay away from Annette months ago. Casey never imagined he

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had been cuckolded, he thought that Vic Bingle was, what's the expression? Making a play for her. Tom assumed he'd short-circuited that approach, saved his wife from being pestered, and that was the end of the matter."

Jack Tidd's squint was baleful. "Then why won't Casey tell us where he was at the time of the killing, eh?"

Good question, and I felt obliged to answer it. Inspector Lamport chuckled, "Colonel Bob's about to pass on the fruits of his famous reconnaissance."

"All right!" I couldn't help seeing the sadly funny side of my information. "I don't know whether Casey got the idea from his wife—or if she started an affair with Bingle to punish Tom for straying." This earned me blank looks. "Tom Casey has been unfaithful, too. Chances are that he was with another woman when Bingle died. Maybe he's trying to save the lady's reputation, not that she would care, or wants to keep Annette in the dark. A bit of both, no doubt."

"Bloody fool, wasting our time like this," Tidd snorted. "Inches away from a serious charge, and he's worried about having a mistress."

"Gentlemen never tell," I pointed out, wondering what that made me. A policeman of sorts, as these two had reminded me, minutes before. Policemen never retire, not all the way . . .

"Back in the summer I took a stroll along Merlin's Causeway, that ridge above South Blazie. Caught a glimpse of shiny red metal among the gorse bushes beside the track. So I investigated, expecting to find a stolen car dumped there. Not so. It was Tom Casey's station wagon, discreetly parked—hidden away, in fact. Struck me as odd, until I noticed footmarks in the long grass, going towards a bungalow in that lane running along the base of the Causeway.

"This was mid-afternoon. I continued my walk, and the car was still there two hours later, when I came back. Tom hadn't just pulled off the track for a few minutes."

Inspector Lamport suggested, "So you took another stroll, the lane this time, to discover whose bungalow he was visiting."

"Wrong, I could tell from up on the hill, even though the place is tucked away among the trees. The roof tiles are so distinctive, that shiny green. Doris Moran lives there."

Lamport barked with laughter. "Friendly sort, our Doris." And to Superintendent Tidd, "You don't know her, sir. One of the merry widows of these parts, leads what you might call a vivid social life. I'd leave home for Doris Moran, myself—only the wife would object."

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"Name rings a bell, I must have seen it on some paperwork or other." Dismissing the elusive scrap of memory, Tidd sighed heavily. "You're saying Casey was with this Moran woman yesterday? Did you spot his car again, then?"

"I haven't been keeping surveillance, Jack. But it's a likely explanation for his clamming up. Ask Doris," I urged. "She may not be Ms. Purity of Turnham Blazie, but she is a good sort, and no liar. If Casey was with her, Doris will say so. Once she goes public, he must see sense and give you a proper statement."

Not for the first time, I was smack on target—only it wasn't the intended bulls-eye.

Dilly Hatton-Pryce phoned me from her niece's house near Vancouver a couple of nights later. "I can't bear it, Robert," she wailed. "What's happening about . . . you know what?"

I was reluctant to tell her. She began guessing aloud, before I tried.

"Poor Tom Casey has been arrested, yes? Look, you know the form in these things, Robert. Find him the best legal representation, I shall foot the bill."

"Hold hard, Dilly. I'm sure Tom will be glad of a good lawyer, but Annette really needs one. If you want to be Lady Bountiful, concentrate on her." Ignorant about international time differences, Dilly had called in the small hours, making me tetchy.

"I don't understand."

"Tom offered a ludicrous alibi; I thought I knew where he had been, so I pointed the police in the right direction. Wrong one for your poor, hard-done Tom, I'm afraid. Not my finest hour, one fears—I cleared him of murder, nailed him for robbery. Doris Moran denied that Tom Casey was her boyfriend. She hardly knew him. But fairly recently, her bungalow was broken into while she was away having her hair done, and stripped of everything worth taking. For weeks before that, Doris had a hunch that she was being watched. Jack Tidd drew the obvious conclusion, sweated Tom Casey, and eventually Tom owned up and talked about his lock-up garage at Steeple Oaks, hired under a false name. It was jam-packed with stolen goods, including Doris's treasures."

"I don't understand," Dilly repeated, meaning that she did not want to.

"Tom had taken up housebreaking for fun and profit, woman! He couldn't tell the police where he was when Vic Bingle got killed,

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because upright, stuffy Tom Casey was in Bristol at the time, doing a deal with a fence."

Forestalling Dilly's reproaches, I argued, "Tom would have had to tell the truth in the end, even if I hadn't stuck my oar in. He was stalling, hoping a better suspect would get him off the hook."

"Never mind that, what did you mean about Annette?"

"It's a good news–bad news situation. You pride yourself on being such a terrific judge of character, so it must be a shock about Tom . . . but at least he isn't a murderer."

"What's the bad news?"

"Annette killed Victor Bingle, my dear. The police got a search warrant for the Caseys' cottage, in case more loot was hidden there. They found a bloodstained dress hidden among cleaning rags in the garden shed. One of Annette's dresses. As soon as Superintendent Tidd asked about it, she confessed the whole thing."

"Impossible," Dilly squeaked. "Why on earth would she do that? Annette was besotted with the wretched man. That's why I steered clear of both the Caseys, in the end. I disapproved of her, and was embarrassed to face Tom, knowing how she had betrayed him. She couldn't have done it. I know Bingle dropped her, but that was weeks before the murder. And she knew he was a philanderer—Annette had sense enough to realise that he had done her a favor by getting out of her life and giving her marriage a chance. It must be a ghastly mistake, Robert."

"No mistake. Annette became concerned that Bingle might talk about their affair, and gossip was bound to reach Tom. She went to the shop and begged Vic to keep his mouth shut. Apparently he laughed in her face, said it was too late, he'd already told his wife. And he just might lay the story on his cronies at The Healthy Thirst next time juicy anecdotes were being exchanged . . .

"The tragedy is, he probably didn't mean it. But being a real four-letter man, Bingle couldn't resist tormenting her. It supports my theory that a poor sense of humor is a dangerous character defect—he got scragged because she couldn't take a joke."

Brooding silence from the far side of the Atlantic. "I misjudged Annette Casey," I conceded, to myself as much as Dilly. "She wasn't selfish, just silly. She wanted Vic to keep quiet, in case Tom did something silly, such as killing the little swine, and landed himself in terrible trouble. But she simply destroyed herself *and* her husband, not to mention a prominent local businessman. Wasn't it Mrs. Thatcher who remarked that it's a funny old world?"

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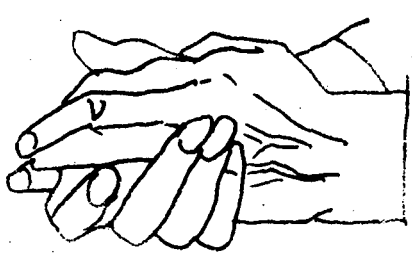
"You," alleged my friend, "are a wicked old man with a long nose for other peoples' business. I shall pay for Annette's defense. That dreadful, two-faced husband of hers, pretending to work hard, and nothing but a common burglar! No wonder she broke her marriage vows."

"Come off it, Annette didn't know she was married to an amateur cracksman. She happened to fall for Victor B's tired line and they had a fling. Revenge never came into it." Properly awake at last, I settled into lecturing mode. After all, I wasn't paying for this sleep-wrecking call. "If you want scapegoats, try Agatha Christie and her chum Miss Marple. They're to blame."

"Robert, are you drunk?"

"On my pathetic pension? I wish. No, hear me out. Like so many immigrants to the sticks, Annette saw a community which no longer exists. She feared the village grapevine, but it withered away ages ago. When she worried over old biddies in a huddle at the bus stop, they would have been discussing imaginary scandals in TV soap operas. Reality bores them, not glamorous enough. Annette was safe, because Turnham Blazie isn't Miss Marple territory any more."

Hanging up before I could counter, Dilly fumed, "For once, I agree, Robert. There'd be no room in our village for her. We have our resident busybody, thank you. By rights, *you* should pay for Annette's lawyers. This is all your fault!"



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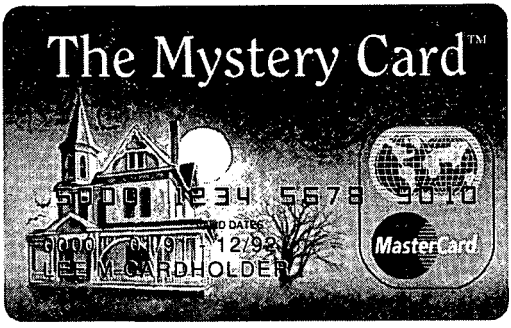

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A writer for National Wildlife, *National Public Radio, and the* Boston Globe, *Tom Verde—a newcomer to* EQMM—*revisits a scene of his travels in a tale that conjures lingering shades of darkest Africa . . .*

THE BIG DANCE

by TOM VERDE

Bancroft sat on the porch of the Regency Cafe waiting for his pot of tea to steep and fanning the flies away with a small dessert menu. The aqua cement walls of the cafe's terrace and the green potted ferns in the corners made the place look cool, but provided little actual comfort from the pervasive heat. On the lawn in front of him were round, wooden tables surrounded by delicate, painted cane chairs. Even though the tables were shielded by red-and-white Cinzano umbrellas, no one was sitting at them.

The sky was clear and brilliantly blue, although Bancroft knew that at any minute it might cloud over and the rain would fall in heavy, powerful sheets. This would last for an hour or so and then suddenly stop, like a faucet being snapped off. The rains had come early to Malawi that year. Each morning, noon, and evening it rained and this would go on for the long months that preceded the summer. Although they were a predictable annoyance, Bancroft didn't mind them much. They were fairly punctual and Bancroft admired punctuality, even that of rainstorms.

Waiters in dark trousers and stiff white shirts stood at the doorway to the cafe holding round brown trays and lazily chatting among themselves. Bancroft kept glancing over at them, hoping to intimidate his waiter into bringing the plate of scones and jam that he had ordered. He continued to be mystified by how long everything took in this country, especially something as simple as cutting a scone in half and placing it on a plate. Although he hated to wait, he got a sense of pleasure out of snapping at waiters, tailors, street vendors—anyone at all in the city who caused him irritation. "Get away from me, you dogs—*choka, choka, iwe,*" he would snarl, em-

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ploying one of the few Chichewan phrases he had bothered to learn.

"You there," he now said to the small black man who was his waiter. "What the devil is taking so long here? A man could starve to death."

"Yes, sir," said the waiter with a short bow. He hurried into the cafe but returned empty-handed, promising Bancroft that he would soon have his food.

Bancroft huffed and poured his tea. "Well, make it fast."

He loosened his tie and placed his hat on the chair next to him. The stiff collar of his shirt had crumpled around the top and he pulled his handkerchief from his breast pocket to wipe the back of his neck.

"Damned heat," he said out loud.

A tall blonde woman and her young daughter stepped up on the porch and sat down at one of the tables. Bancroft eyed her carefully as she put her bags down on the floor and crossed her long legs. Her daughter plopped down in the chair opposite her and asked for ice cream; the woman ordered tea and unfolded a map on the table. Bancroft didn't recognize her and he believed he knew every white person in Blantyre, for he had been there fifteen years. A tourist, he thought to himself. Why anyone would want to come on holiday to Malawi was beyond him. The safari was better in Zimbabwe and the only decent beaches were on the shores of Lake Malawi, far north of the city. He decided that she must have been visiting with her husband who, like himself, worked for one of the British-owned companies in the city.

Bancroft's scones arrived and he covered them with butter and jam as he watched the blonde woman drink her tea. Bits of the scone clung to his mustache as he chewed and thought of the different ways he might enjoy having sex with her. The bottom of her skirt had risen a little, exposing part of her thigh, which was white and round. He paid close attention to the thigh as he poured himself more tea and swirled a generous helping of sugar into the cup.

He was in the habit of keeping a Malawian girl about as a mistress, yet he remained very lustful for women of his own race—often those who were married because he greatly enjoyed the detachment of making love to a married woman. It meant that he could not possibly be placed in a position of responsibility for the woman or her desires, save those of her sexuality.

Bancroft had been married himself once, many years ago, when he lived in London. His two-year bride came with him to Malawi

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when Britchard & Peck, the tea export company for which Bancroft worked, sent him to Blantyre to take over the position of chief fields inspector. Although Bancroft considered the job an excellent opportunity, his wife, Adela, was much less than enthusiastic. She hated it there, and she began to hate him as well. Eighteen months barely went by before she packed her bags and returned to England for what she told Bancroft and everyone else was a holiday.

"It's this oppressive heat," she said, "and this ghastly country. I simply must experience a cool, wet British September again before I die."

She let out that she would be back in six weeks, but somehow both she and Bancroft knew that she would not return. He was hardly surprised then when her letter telling him of this arrived some weeks after her departure. In it, she wrote Bancroft that she could no longer tolerate his drinking, his gambling, his staying out until all hours, and above all what she termed his "infidelity," which he thought a rather gracious way of describing his habit of soliciting prostitutes. Bancroft had saved the letter until he moved into a small house in the center of town, when he found it in a box with some other items of correspondence, all of which he discarded.

The woman and her daughter stood up at the table and gathered their things to go. Bancroft fiddled with the idea of running after her and perhaps asking her to join him later for a drink, but thought better of it. He had to be in court that afternoon, so he paid his check, donned his hat, and made his way across the sun-bleached square, busy with heckling street vendors, towards the courthouse.

Bancroft's solicitor, Mr. Starkey, had told him to arrive an hour early so that the two of them could go over some aspects of Bancroft's case. He was being tried for the murder of a Malawian woman named Melissa Mkandawire whose body was discovered near a village just outside of Blantyre. The murdered girl was a prostitute. Her parents said that she had been seeing Bancroft and that he was known to be violent with her. They were certain that it was he who killed their daughter. The sworn statement of a gardener who worked at the house next door to Bancroft's had led to his arrest. The gardener, when questioned by the police, said that he saw Melissa Mkandawire enter Bancroft's house on the night of the murder. He did not see her come back out. He stated that he also saw Bancroft's car leaving the property and that the car was not back at the house until the next day.

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It was with great effort that Mr. Starkey secured Bancroft's release before the trial, and then only with the posting of a substantial bail put up by Britchard & Peck. The white community in Blantyre was shocked to hear the news, which they could not believe. Bancroft had the sympathy of his companions at the club and at the tea company; the Malawians with whom he had contact simply avoided mentioning the situation, although it was being spoken of in every village from Blantyre to the Zomba Plateau.

Bancroft was pleading not guilty and bore the accusation with phlegmatic disconcern. He carried on his business and left the defense work to Mr. Starkey, who truly believed in Bancroft's innocence. The evidence against his client was entirely insufficient, he contended. He was prepared to prove that Bancroft had been in the northern city of Lilongwe at the time of the murder. The prosecution had one witness, the gardener—an old man who had worked at the house next to Bancroft's less than a month. Mr. Starkey looked into this man's history and learned that he had a reputation as a shiftless drunkard. The solicitor was confident that this witness's testimony would be called highly into question when stacked up against the word of his client, a respectable businessman in the community.

Bancroft, of course, was guilty. He had beaten Melissa Mkandawire to death in his bedroom after the girl had asked him for more money. She was angry and had said that he had not paid her for the last two times. Bancroft simply laughed in her face. She grew hysterical and Bancroft hit her in the mouth, splitting open her lower lip. Sucking on her own blood, she began to scream at Bancroft, insulting him, telling him that he was a terrible, disgusting old man, an awful lover and a foolish *azungu,* or white man, who could pay her now or pay dearly later when she told her people what he had done to her. In a rage, Bancroft picked up a heavy stick from beside the fireplace and hit her on the shoulder. She raised her arms to protect her head and he began to swipe at her body with the stick, cornering her as she stumbled back across the room. She was screaming at him to stop when he dealt a final blow to her skull.

He then sat down in a chair on the other side of the room and looked at the girl's crumpled body on his bedroom floor. His mouth was dry and he was breathing terribly hard as his mind raced, absorbing what he had just done and formulating a plan to cover it up. The chair beside the fireplace was overturned, the small table in the corner had broken when she fell on it, there was blood all over the rug—he must get rid of that; the body must be disposed of

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quickly, before it got light. Bancroft went into the living room, his hands shaking, and poured himself a drink of whiskey. He poured another and then returned to the bedroom where he rolled the girl's body up in the rug. He went out and spread newspapers in the trunk of his car, then returned to the house for the body. He placed it in the trunk, drove down his driveway, and headed north.

When he was a few miles outside the city, he turned down a dirt road that led into the jungle, past the vast, open tea fields. He pulled his car over to the side of the road, took the body from the trunk, and dumped it in the woods. He got back in his car and drove toward Lilongwe until he saw a brush fire in a field several miles away from where he had dumped the girl's body. These fires burned day and night and were set by villagers to clear the land for planting. He stopped his car, dragged the bloodied rug, the newspapers, and the log with which he had bludgeoned the girl to the fire and tossed them in, watching the flames leap up and consume these last bits of evidence against him. His face was flushed from the fire and he rubbed the soot from his eyes, but he waited until it all had burned. All the while his mind was bent on getting to Lilongwe as soon as possible so that he could check into the hotel and spend the night away from Blantyre, hopefully creating for himself an alibi.

The following day, he visited the company's branch office and attended to some routine business there. His position allowed him to come and go as he pleased and no one questioned his unscheduled appearance. He stopped off at the club for lunch and a game of golf and was back in Blantyre that evening. The next morning, the police came to his house and put him under arrest for the murder of Melissa Mkandawire. He immediately contacted Mr. Starkey, who spent the day in the magistrate's office arranging Bancroft's release pending the trial. As there was no official coroner in the city, the police relied on the forensic report of one of the doctors from the city hospital to determine how the girl had been murdered. The cause of death had been simple enough to deduce—blood loss and the cracked skull. The doctor, an overworked government employee, could not precisely state when the victim died, however, and speculated that it had been between the hours of one and four A.M.; Bancroft had checked into his hotel by eleven o'clock the preceding night.

It was generally assumed among the white community that the girl had been murdered by one of her own people—a jealous boyfriend or perhaps members of the secret cult of the *Gule wa Mkulu*, or the Big Dance, also known as the *Nyau*. The *Nyau* was one of the

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few traditional cults left in Malawi and certainly its most dangerous. Its devotees met in graveyards at night arrayed in terrifying costumes resembling jungle creatures. They traveled the roads, performing fearsome dances and accosting any stranger they came upon, asking him a series of secret questions. If the person could not properly answer them, the *Nyaus* would pursue him and attack him with the ferocity of whatever beast they were impersonating. Not infrequently, these confrontations ended in death.

Although the government condemned these activities, the Big Dance was still in practice in the outlying areas where the arm of the law was short and ineffectual. Incidents such as this were not spoken of by urban Malawians; the people in the villages, though, knew the *Nyau* well and most knew how to protect themselves against its horrible violence. Although the killing seemed arbitrary and senseless, Malawian tradition ran deep in the cult, and two hundred years of British occupancy had done virtually nothing to root it out.

The Blantyre courthouse was located in the government building in the center of town. The pale-yellow mudbrick structure had once been the *boma* or District Officer's headquarters. Outside the courtroom door was a low, two-tiered bench upon which witnesses were required to sit before being called in for testimony. On the door to the courtroom was a sign written in both Chichewa and English which read "All witnesses giving evidence must remain out of court."

Mr. Starkey's office was located in the same building, two doors down. As Bancroft walked along the porch surrounding the *boma,* he noticed the old gardener sitting quietly on the bench. The man wore tattered pants, an old soiled jersey, and a tired straw hat on his head. His chocolate-brown face was sprinkled with white stubble, and Bancroft observed that one of his eyes was filmed over with blindness. Looking down at the spindly figure, Bancroft also noticed that the man's right foot was twisted unnaturally in toward the left. So, this was the prosecution's star witness, he chuckled to himself. He went briskly past the old man, who bowed his head and softly clapped his hands together in greeting. As Bancroft walked on, the one good eye followed him down the porch.

"Hullo, Bancroft," said Mr. Starkey as his client entered the office. "Bloody hot one again today, eh?"

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"Beastly," replied Bancroft, taking off his hat and sitting in a wooden chair.

"We're up for hearing at one, but I don't think it will last much into the afternoon. Should get us out for tea, anyway. How are you holding up, old man?"

"Fine," said Bancroft, lifting a cigarette from a case and lighting it. "I trust you've gotten everything all sewn up here."

"Not to worry, old boy. I have a sworn statement from the desk clerk at the Lilongwe Hotel saying that you were in your room well before the time of the victim's death, plus character witnesses lined up from here to Jo'berg. Your record with the company has been impeccable. The only thing the prosecution has going for them is the testimony of a half-crippled, purblind old man—a testimony it will be no great task to call into serious question. No, no, believe me, we'll have you out by teatime or I stake my reputation on it."

The trial went much as Mr. Starkey had predicted. Under cross-examination, he showed that the gardener was a known drunkard whose testimony could not be relied upon. Bancroft was acquitted of all charges and released that afternoon. Melissa's parents were in the courtroom and sat rigid as the magistrate announced his decision. They returned to their village that night and held the ceremony for the dead, the entire village sharing in their grief.

Bancroft spent the rest of the afternoon and evening at the club, standing rounds for his friends and celebrating his acquittal. The club closed at ten and Bancroft, quite drunk and lustful, thought he would drive north to a brothel he had once visited well outside the city. He drove along the highway several miles looking for the right road, but as he had only been once before, he was unsure of the way. He took his next left, down an open dirt road lined by tall acacia trees. The foliage grew thicker along the roadside as he began to realize that he had gone the wrong way. Uncoordinated from the drink, he awkwardly slammed his foot toward the brake pedal and hit the accelerator instead. The car lurched forward and he lost control of the wheel, causing him to drive headlong into a ditch by the side of the road. The engine died and though Bancroft tried starting it again, it wouldn't turn over. The headlights shone crookedly into the jungle before him and he stumbled out of the car, leaning on the dented hood and waving his hand through the steam hissing from the radiator. He felt a bruise starting on his forehead and kicked the side of the car.

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"Damn!" he shouted. He had no idea where he was or how far he had driven from the city. The accident had sobered him a bit and he could think clearly enough to know that he had somehow to get back. He listened in the darkness for the sounds of other cars but heard nothing except the slow, dying hiss of the vehicle.

"I must be bleeding miles from the main road," he cursed to himself as he reached into his pocket for a cigarette. As he raised his face from the burning match, he thought he saw a light flicker in the jungle. It flickered again, this time a little closer. He stepped toward the edge of the trees and followed the light as it bobbed in and out of view.

"Is someone there?" he asked. There was no response. "Can you help me? My car is stuck."

He saw the light again and then it disappeared. He walked slowly along the edge of the trees and came upon an opening. There before him was a tall, thatched wall buttressed by a small embankment. He had never seen such an odd structure before and he stepped over the embankment for a closer look. Behind the wall he saw several oblong mounds on the jungle floor; each mound was covered with yellowed, dead wreaths. There was an unnatural strange silence in the place and the earth beneath his feet was soft and dank.

Suddenly, in the distance, he heard the baying of an animal. It could have been a dog, but then again it might have been a hyena. He listened for the howl again but heard nothing. Strange, he thought, that it should only howl the one time.

He stood still, looking around him in the darkness, and grew fearful. He thought that he had better spend the night in the car and wait until daylight when he could find his way back to the main road and perhaps hitch a ride to Blantyre. As he stumbled from behind the wall, he heard a soft, muffled growl somewhere behind him. Turning slowly, his hand trembling as he brought his cigarette from his lips, he looked in the direction of the growl but couldn't tell what it was or where it was coming from. He hurried out to the road and heard the growl again, this time much closer. When he reached the road, his breath stopped short. A hundred feet away in the pale moonlight was some kind of tall, dark, quivering, four-legged creature. It looked like a wildebeest, but it had far too much hair. Turning its quaking head, the creature suddenly noticed him and then he heard it howl.

Bancroft turned quickly on his heels and ran. He heard the creature howl again and he turned back to see it chasing him, long,

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black streams of hair flying behind it as it ran. It shook angrily and dipped and bowed its massive head to some silent rhythm as it thudded along, and Bancroft began to sob with fear when he heard the creature's howl once more, this time very recognizably human. His lungs began to ache and his heart drummed mercilessly. He didn't need to look behind him again to know that the creature was but a few feet away for he heard the thick rustle of its body as he stumbled in a rut in the road and fell face down in the dust. He turned over on his back and saw the creature standing over him, furiously shaking its ghastly body.

"G—get back," he stammered, "g—g—get away!"

He groped beside him as he edged his way in the dirt, searching for something to strike at the beast with. Then he felt a dry, dusty, twisted foot on his wrist. There were men all around him now in long straw skirts and carved wooden masks. In their hands they held clubs that were thick and shiny. He heard cruel laughter echoing densely behind the masks and the one who stood with his foot on Bancroft's wrist leaned over and spoke to him in Chichewa.

"Choka . . . choka iwe, eeh, azungu?"

Bancroft quickly pulled his arm out from under the man's foot and tried scrambling upright. He heard the man let out a cry and then felt the heavy weight of a club on the back of his neck. He fell to the ground in pain and saw the creature leaping in front of him. He saw four human legs underneath the hairy coat and put his hands over his head as he sobbed, "No, no, please!"

The blows then began to fall hard and fast.

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Historian, counselor, high-school principal, Dr. Ben Louis is a character very dear to the heart of his creator, E.S. Russell. Ms. Russell had completed two books featuring her sleuth before she realized how closely he was based on her husband Stan. After the publication of those first two Ben Louis books and a third non-series mystery in the seventies (all under the Doubleday Crime Club imprint) the author took a long break from fiction writing, returning only last year with Death of a Cloudwalker *(Walker & Company). Walker has a new Ben Louis mystery,* Dead Easy, *due out this spring, but this is the amateur detective's first appearance in a short story . . .*

LAST BITE

by E. S. RUSSELL

It took something less than five hours, the last three at one stretch, to tear up the manuscript. And now his hands hurt so much that if the advance royalty check some day to be—rightfully—all his were waiting on his desk to be endorsed for deposit, he wouldn't have been able to hold a pen to sign his name.

On the other hand, anticipation was sweet.

He sat resting for a while, massaging his fingers and palms and looking at the bulging supermarket shopping bags. Christ, what a job! But what else could he have done? To flush all that paper down the toilet would have taken hours, days, assuming the plumbing held up and the tenants downstairs didn't complain to the building superintendent. And without access to a shredder, or a wood-burning stove or a fireplace, or a yard to bury two rough drafts and one clean copy in, never mind a shovel to dig a hole—

Hey! Should he have rented a car and driven into the country and sunk the bundle in a lake?

And spent money doing it? Come on. For a teacher any unnecessary expenditure was stupid. He had learned that lesson long ago, watching his father spend next year's increment plus whatever he

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could make moonlighting on family and mortgage and one used-car loan after another, and dying young and still in debt.

No, it's better the way I did it, he thought. Staying free of entanglements, postponing his grats for the day when he could afford them, always saving where he could. Which included tearing up three or four pages at a time, the sixteen-pound paper tough and unwilling, and distributing the pieces among the big black plastic bags, to be put out one a week for three weeks for the trash pickup. Too bad he'd missed today's pickup and not gotten rid of one. Oh well.

But clever? Damn clever. Three bags' worth of jigsaw puzzle that no one—not even he, who knew their contents better than anybody else did—could put together again, assuming they'd ever be found. Impossible—both.

He smiled, enjoying equally the pain and stiffness in his hands and the prospect of a long-delayed courting of the pretty, childless widow across the hall. Then he went into the bathroom and filled the basin with hot water and flexed and stretched his fingers in it. Delicious.

Murder had been easier. Not pleasanter—after all, I'm no monster, he told himself—but definitely easier.

On that thought he went to bed. Classes as usual in the morning, and in the afternoon goodbye and good riddance to the bastard who'd tried to cut him out of his own work. Yes, another enjoyably challenging day, and summer vacation starting in ten days. Starting with the widow. Still smiling, he slept.

"Since we'll be closing early and first bell's in eight minutes, let's keep this short," Ben Louis said. "I don't have much anyway, just a few bits and pieces."

His staff, a cheerful bunch usually, looked up, looked down, riffled through their notes, mumbled crankily, their Friday spoiled, the smokers restless. Everyone had liked Fred Beech, and everyone had accused him of hiding his light under the bushel that was Manton High School (No one says that about me, Ben grumbled, ignoring the fact that his wife Jane had been saying it for years) instead of awarding himself to MIT at the very least. So now the poor guy was dead of the stupidest imaginable accident while his wife and kids were back home in Chicago visiting the folks, and goddammit, it wasn't *fair*.

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A lifetime of excellence in public service shouldn't end in such a death, Ben thought, restless with his own dissatisfactions and self-doubts.

"At least he finished the book," he said aloud, and heads went up questioningly. "The book. The high-school math text. I thought everybody knew."

Eric Stahl, who taught math and biological science, shook his head. "He didn't. Finish it. The overview, maybe. A few notes. Not the writing. I should know, because the whole slant of the book was my idea in the first place. I didn't feel up to all that work a second time—something else I want to do anyway—but naturally I was interested. We were talking about it when he—when he died."

"But I thought—"

Stahl shrugged. "Talk."

"No reason not to change your mind and do the book yourself, Eric," Ben said encouragingly. Almost the last thing a high-school principal needs to complicate his life further is an unhappy staffer. "After all, you two'd done fine work together on the grade-school text. Going into the second edition's nothing to sneeze at, and I bet that's only the beginning."

Eric Stahl shrugged again, and Jim Levy (social studies) laughed. "Hey, guy, there's no charge for being impressed with yourself. Fred sure was. You two selling that text to the whole goddam state of Texas—"

"And then California," Ben said, still in there pitching for Stahl but wishing he liked him better.

"Right, and California," Levy said. "I mean, we're talking tens of thousands of royalty dollars here, folks, and if it was me, I'd be shouting it out from the rooftop. And I wouldn't salute my success in fruit juice, like Fred, for godsake—I'd be knocking back the Dom Pérignon. And then I'd make tracks to get out of this rat race. What's the matter with you, Eric? Your half of all that money's rolling in and you haven't even bought us poor slobs a round of drinks. What the hell you waiting for? The good life's nothing to sneeze at, either."

"Well, neither's seeing a friend and colleague laughing one minute, and the next minute choking to death in my apartment on a piece of goddam *steak!*"

Steak? Even a peanut butter sandwich from Eric would be a first, was everyone's unspoken thought. Because Eric never socialized, never shared, and never worked anywhere with Fred Beech but in school.

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"Doesn't say all that much for your hospitality, Eric," Billy Franz (phys ed) joked, and got looked at. "Sorry—didn't mean to . . . I'm sorry. It's just that, well, this isn't all that great of a day."

"If only I'd learned the Heimlich maneuver!" Stahl said, raging at himself. "You see those big posters in restaurants, but who actually reads them? And even if I'd known what to do, he wouldn't let me near him, he was so scared—crashing around with his hands at his throat—and never mind I was scared to keep trying, I couldn't even get *hold* of him! And then in no time flat he passes out, and he's dead before the EMTs arrive, and I'm standing there! Just goddam *standing* there!"

"Lots of groups, businesses, I mean, y'know," Billy Franz said hesitantly, trying to retrieve his status, "they practice all kindsa first-aid moves, get the medics in to teach classes. Y'know, on the off chance. Maybe we should." And spoiled it all by adding, "A little late closing the barn door, maybe, but better late than never."

"Good idea, Billy," Ben said, blushing inwardly for him. "Check it out with Public Health or whoever, and get back to us."

The suggestion reproached their ignorance and deepened their depression. Clearly nothing was going to be accomplished now. Ben stood up. "See you at the church at one," he said, and was first out of the staff room.

On the way back to his office he passed the room in which he gave history lectures on closed-circuit TV and where Jane and her ladies were striking the set that had illustrated Turn-of-the-Century Crime in the Cities. The program had gone well (as usual, Jane would have said), and as usual the love-it-or-leave-it school-board members who now and then watched something other than sitcoms and sports news had stopped by to wonder if Ben had "gone too far."

Jane kissed him over an armload of period posters and newspapers. "Just how far or in what direction, they didn't say. Will you come home for me, darling, or should I meet you at the church? Everybody here's going right from school, so getting a ride's no problem."

"Sure," he said vaguely and wandered out (and Jane arranged for a ride). Something's wrong, he thought. It doesn't jive. Of course all I saw was the introduction—and a very nice compliment he paid me in it—but I inferred that he was about ready to have the final draft typed. So either he never did write more than that intro and a few notes, or I misunderstood him, or he lied, or Eric lied.

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Lied? Isn't that a strong word to use? Why would either of them lie? Why am I so suspicious—and of whom? Am I looking for trouble? (Doesn't a school administrator have enough?) Or does something about Fred's last supper stick in my craw too?

With a bang whose import the outer office understood very well but that anyway guaranteed him nothing in the way of privacy, he shut the door of his sanctum and returned to the work on his desk. No. In his present mood, no. He whirled around in his big chair to face the parking lot and ask himself more questions.

What exactly had Fred Beech said about the manuscript? Only that on the strength of it Irene had found a house within their means and that he'd be resigning at the end of the summer and moving back to Chicago and doing some teaching at the university, maybe even some consulting, and at last—O happiness!—he was going to get his teeth fixed.

Didn't that sound as if he had indeed completed the manuscript? Or was he going to finish it while supporting his family on his half of the elementary-textbook royalties plus some teaching and consulting plus a fat advance based on that introduction and overview?

One thing was certain. When states as huge as Texas and California bought a textbook that would be used in every one of their schools, and when that book was already into another edition (with who knows how many more to follow), you were talking serious royalties. Very serious indeed. What publisher and writer(s) would not happily go for seconds?

What, then, was keeping Eric Stahl so busy or making him so tired that he had opted out of another immensely successful collaboration? Had he saved so much money that he didn't need any more? There was something wrong here. Eric Stahl wasn't behaving like Eric Stahl.

What is it about that guy, anyway, that gives me the pip? Ben asked himself, more than usually irritable when the solution to a problem was not merely out of reach but out of sight. (Or only seemed to be, Jane would have said.)

What was in sight were a Mercedes 190E, an Acura Legend, a Jaguar XJS, a Buick LeSabre, a brand-new Land Rover, a Chrysler LeBaron, and a world-weary old Ford. His. He spun around again and his outraged eye fell on the phone, which was all but buried in clutter. But inspiration is a sly creature, and Ben picked up the

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receiver and dialed a well-known number without even thinking about it.

"Manton Police Department. Officer Jenkins speaking."

"Hi, Ted. Ben Louis. Nope, everything's fine here. No guns, no knives, no riots, nobody smoking in the john or giving birth under the stair. Just had a question for the chief. He in?"

A moment passed. Then Police Chief Colin MacWhirter, a giant of a man with the appetite of a ravening wolf and a stomach like a bottomless pit, said in his suety voice, "What's up, Ben? And keep it short. I'm on my way home for lunch."

"The memorial service is at two. Sure you'll have enough time?" Ben needled, and MacWhirter snorted, stung. "Okay, okay. Tell me about Fred Beech's death."

"You could've called the M.E. and I could be on my way home."

"I know, but tell me anyway."

"What's to tell? A nice guy eats out while his wife's away, gets plastered with his friend—"

"Hold it, Colin." Someone had said something at the meeting about celebrating . . . about drinking. Who was it? What was it? "Gets *what?*"

"I said, gets plastered. What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing, but—"

"But what? Something wrong with getting plastered once in a while? Look, can I finish my sentence? He gets plastered and inhales a chunk of—"

"But I don't think—"

"He inhales a chunk of meat, damn it, Ben, while laughing at a joke, and that's all she wrote."

"Is that what Ivan Cantor wrote?"

"You kidding? You think I got his report in my hand? Ben, you know that guy. Takes him a week to decide which form to fill out."

"Then is what you told me what he told you?"

"More or less. And so did that tight-assed biology teacher of yours, Eric Stahl."

Got it! Ben thought. Now I remember. It was Jim Levy—something Jim said about drinking Dom Pérignon, nothing but the best. But Fred didn't like alcohol, or even caffeine, now I come to think about it. He never drank anything but juice—well, and water, of course. He didn't even like milk. No wonder he'd always had bad teeth.

"Look, Ben, is that all? Because I gotta—"

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"Colin, Fred Beech never drank booze of any kind. And the only way he could eat meat or just about anything else would be if he cut it into little teeny bits. He had bad teeth, if you can call them that. Now if he were an Indian, his wife would chew the food first—"

"Yech!"

"Well, after all, baby food—"

"Ben!"

"Sorry, Colin. Go eat."

"You think I could eat now? Aw right, what's on your mind? You generally don't give up so fast."

"No. Eat. Call you back." Ben hung up and in the same motion dialed another well-known number.

"Dr. Cantor's at a meeting, Dr. Louis," a voice said. "But I'd be glad to take a message."

"Can't wait, Elspeth."

"But—"

"Get him, Elspeth. Now." Ben's voice was steely with menace, and a moment later the medical examiner, slightly out of breath from running, said, "You scared the daylights out of that poor gal, Ben. What's goin' down?"

"Iv, you finish with Fred Beech yet?"

"Well, I—"

"Have you or haven't you?"

"Well, yes and no, Ben. I mean, I thought I was, and I started to write my report and then something came—"

"Ivan. Tell me what you found."

"Well, I'm not exactly used to rushing like this, Ben, as you—"

There was a quality in Ben's silence that moved people to obey him. The medical examiner said hastily, "I know what killed him, I mean actually. He choked to death. But here's a strange thing, Ben. The food in his stomach was small, in small bits—too small, I mean, for the length of time they'd been there. I mean, it isn't as if he'd eaten hours before the end and digestion was moving right along. Although it had certainly started, of course. But all of a sudden he eats a piece of meat big enough to plug a drainpipe. I thought about it and thought about it, and then almost at the last moment I drew some body fluids for a tox—toxicological exam, which I'm ashamed to say I'd almost not bothered to do even though it's essential routine practice even when things look open and shut, y'know? I mean, I began to wonder about something. How well'd you know'm, Ben? I mean, was he a nervous type?"

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"About as nervous as the Rock of Gibraltar."

"Oh? Then here's strange fact number two. There was valium and alcohol in him. What do you think of that? As I see it, he must've gotten pretty drunk—though he wasn't totally zonked—and inhaled that steak into his pharynx. Happened to Tennessee Williams, remember? Well, *he* choked on a bottle cap. But anyway, too many people choke on a bolus of food when they aren't in top condition to pay attention. I've seen several such deaths. Sometimes the Heimlich maneuver'll pop the plug out. If you know how to do it and get there in time—"

"Could it—the food—have been put there?"

"What *put?* Inserted, you mean? Well, if your victim's drunk enough, sure. Ram it in with a hemostat—if you know how to use one and you happen to have one around. But that isn't the usual—"

"How long does it take to choke to death?"

"Not long, Ben, and that's a fact. Victim passes out in twenty seconds. Then all the way out 'n gone in maybe five minutes. Course, he can be saved after as much as four of those minutes if there's no brain damage. You know, from loss of oxygen. Always a chance he'll be a vegetable, of course, but he'd be alive."

"But if there's any delay getting the EMTs—"

"Oh, in that case he hasn't a hope."

"When were you planning to tell Colin?"

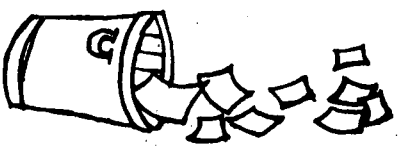
"Well, I really don't know for sure, Ben. I wanted to check through everything a couple times more. Say, what's all this in aid of?"

"Murder," Ben said, and rang off.

Within an hour the police were in possession of three supermarket shopping bags filled to the brim with paper scraps. Also a bottle of valium. Also a haemostat, a tool found in any science laboratory where frogs are routinely dissected.

At two o'clock the Unitarian-Universalist Church on the common opened its door to the staff of Manton High School and everyone else who had known and liked Fred Beech.

Everyone except Eric Stahl, who was otherwise engaged.



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a *NEW* Rand story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

In the Golden Age of detective fiction, Ronald Knox expounded nine rules governing the art of the detective story, all of which concern, in one way or another, the notion of fairness to the reader. No one plays fairer than Ed Hoch, one of the best modern writers of the classic detective story, and this most recent Rand episode brings to mind particularly Knox's eighth rule, which prohibits the detective from discovering any clues "which he does not instantly produce for the inspection of the reader." Mr. Hoch puts the information necessary to solve the crime before us in a characteristically adept way in the following story, which revolves around a missing Greek statue and an ancient theater ticket . . .

THE SPY AND THE GREEK ENIGMA

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Rand had felt uneasy from the moment he set foot on Greek soil. It was an ancient country, and he had accompanied his wife Leila here for an ancient purpose—to join an archaeological dig at the site of a classic outdoor theater at Eretria.

"How far is this place?" Rand asked, surveying the Parthenon from the Athens hotel room on their first morning in the city.

Leila came out of the bathroom, drying herself on an oversized hotel towel. "About thirty-five miles as the crow flies, but unfortunately we're not crows. Eretria is on a large island just off the coast. We either have to take the ferry or drive up to Chalkis and cross on the bridge."

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"I vote for the bridge. Ferries in this part of Europe are likely to be most unreliable."

"Agreed." She smiled and joined him at the window, slipping her arm easily around him. "It hasn't been so bad, has it?"

"We're not there yet!"

"I don't mean the trip, foolish! I mean our marriage."

"No, no. After fifteen years I guess I can accompany you on a dig. I know how you've missed it."

"Teaching archaeology at the university isn't the same as practicing it in the field. And I know you'll like Professor Rimbard. He's in charge of the dig."

For Rand, the whole thing had been an excuse to get away from England, to avoid having to face any of the people who'd taken over at British Intelligence after the forced retirement of his old friend Hastings. He'd sworn not to work for them again, and he meant to keep his vow. Besides, the sight of a radiant Leila on her way to an archaeological site made the whole thing worthwhile.

They'd rented a car the previous evening, as soon as they arrived at the Athens airport, and now they left the hotel to drive north. They crossed the bridge at Chalkis and reached Eretria in little more than an hour. The site of the dig was in the same area as an unusual theater dating from the fourth century B.C., Leila informed him as they drove up and parked next to a shabby-looking camper with French license plates.

A man in his thirties, wearing khaki shorts and a pith helmet, separated by an expanse of evenly tanned chest, came out to meet them. "I'm Rimbard. You must be Leila Gaad."

"Leila Rand. This is my husband, Jeffrey." The two men shook hands. "I heard you speak at Reading University last year."

"Reading—that's where you lecture? You should have come up and introduced yourself. You're quite well known, especially among Egyptologists."

Leila laughed. "How many of those are there around?"

"You'd be surprised." He turned to Rand, trying to include him in the conversation. "This your first dig, Jeffrey?"

"Yes, it is."

"You're in government work?"

"Retired."

"Ah, it's good to take early retirement. Hope I can do it myself someday. Come along, then, and I'll show you the dig."

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Rand was already regretting his presence, and he'd taken a dislike to this handsome bare-chested man who hadn't even bothered to reveal his given name. When they reached the archaeological site he saw that a team of a dozen or so men and women were at work. Some were obviously local people, hired as laborers to haul away buckets of dirt, but two women and at least two of the men seemed to be British or French. All wore shorts, even one of the men who seemed older than the rest. Digging in the sun was hot, sweaty work.

"Muriel," Rimbard called out, "I want to introduce you to Professor Leila Gaad Rand and her husband."

The nearest of the young women brushed off her hands and came to meet them. Her name was Muriel Baker and she was a graduate student from London. She knew of Leila's reputation and seemed thrilled to meet her. "You'll be working with us, Mrs. Rand?"

"Please call me Leila. Yes, I'll be here for several days. I haven't been on a dig in over fifteen years."

"You can meet the rest of them later," Rimbard said with a wave of his hand. "Muriel will show you what we're up to here and you can join in if you wish. Meanwhile, I'll show your husband around the site."

Leila gave him a sad goodbye shrug, indicating that she'd have liked to have seen the rest of the site too. Then she dutifully went off with the tanned graduate student.

"Eretria is a very old site," Professor Rimbard explained as they hiked across the gently sloping hill toward the remains of an ancient open-air theater. "Perhaps Leila mentioned that this theater dates from the fourth century B.C."

"I understand there are a great many of these in Greece," Rand commented, studying the semicircle of tiered stone seats.

"More than sixty have been found and many of them restored for use in annual drama festivals. But none of them are quite like this." He led Rand to the stage area and continued, "This would have been the skene, the backdrop before which the performances were given. Follow me. It's quite safe."

He'd disappeared down a hole that led underground. Following him, Rand found himself in a dark vaulted passage, lit only by the daylight at either end. "Where does this lead?"

"You'll see."

They emerged from the other end and Rand found himself in the middle of the orchestra, surrounded by the stone seats. "Interesting, but what was its purpose?"

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"We suspect it was for the sudden dramatic appearance of demons or other Underworld personages. It's known that the gods usually spoke from a balcony above the main stage, so perhaps the devils came from below."

They returned to the dig to find the others taking a break. The British, at least, seemed to be having tea and Rand decided it was indeed the proper time of day for it. "This is fascinating!" Leila said as she joined him. "We've come upon what looks like the arm of a statue!"

Muriel was busy telling Rimbard about their find, and Leila introduced Rand to a young Frenchman named Armand Quintal. "That's his camper we're parked next to."

"Are you a student?" Rand asked.

"Alas, no. Sometimes I wish I still were. I'm at a museum of antiquities in Paris, a small place with a small budget."

Rand told Leila about the theater, complete with its passage from the Underworld. At that point an older man joined in the discussion. Rand learned that his name was Jules Lemarch. He had the wrinkled, tired face of a man in his late sixties, and on his arm was still visible the tattooed identification number from a Nazi concentration camp.

"Since this type of passage has not been found in other theaters," he told them, "one surmises that the theater here may have performed more elaborate productions." As he spoke he played with a handful of metal discs that looked like coins.

"What are those?" Rand asked.

Lemarch passed them over and Rand saw that each disc was imprinted with a different Greek letter. "We often find them at the sites of ancient theaters. They seem to have been used as admission tickets, with the letters referring to various sections of benches."

"Interesting," Rand commented. He indicated the tattooed number on Lemarch's arm. "Did you get that at Auschwitz?"

He nodded. "How could you tell?"

"I used to be in intelligence work. Right after the war, when I was very young, I worked at interrogating refugees. After a while I could recognize each camp's style of tattoo."

"A singular talent," the Frenchman commented with a wry grin. He slipped the ancient tokens into his right-hand pants pocket. "I'd better get back to work on uncovering that statue."

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Rand watched their labors for more than an hour, as they brushed away layers of dirt to uncover more of the marble arm. "It's painstaking work," Armand Quintal said, taking a break from his own area of digging to watch the others with Rand.

"Hard to believe anything new could be found after all this time."

Quintal shrugged. "It's a big Earth. Lots of room to dig."

Sadie Jones, the other English girl on the dig, gave a shout of triumph as the full statue was revealed at last. "We've got it, Professor!" she called out to Rimbard.

He came over to examine it, issuing quick orders to the local workers to lend a hand. "Very good," he decided after examining it. "A well-preserved kouros." For Rand's benefit, he added, "That's a naked young man, a popular subject for Greek sculpture." The uncovered statue was of a standing youth, about three feet tall. Rimbard examined it from all sides, finally producing a magnifying glass for a closer look. Meanwhile, Muriel was snapping pictures.

"How old do you think it is?" Leila asked.

"The style would tend to indicate the fifth century B.C., but—"

"But what?" Jules Lemarch asked.

"Its authenticity is something for the experts to decide. We only dig them up." He and Quintal lifted it very carefully while Muriel Baker produced padded wrappings. Rand could sense the exhilaration among the team, even though Rimbard's own reaction was somewhat muted.

Later that evening Leila and Rand dined with Professor Rimbard and Muriel Baker, who seemed to be his special favorite. She'd changed into a flowered dress for the occasion, and they drove to a country inn nearby. "Is the kouros safe overnight?" Rand asked. "Some of the workmen were eyeing it."

He smiled. "I have it locked in my van. After taking part in so many digs, some workers fancy themselves as experts. They were merely trying to judge its authenticity themselves."

"I gather you have some doubts," Leila said.

Rimbard poured a bit more wine into their glasses before responding. "This kouros was carved from a white, chalky marble of a type found on the Greek island of Thasos, far to the north of here. It's very unusual to find it in this area, though that in itself is no proof of forgery."

Muriel smiled and placed a hand over his. "You try too hard to debunk your findings, Niles," she told him, using his given name for the first time.

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"If I do it, I save someone else the trouble."

The others were staying at the site, sleeping in a huddle of tents between the parking area and the dig itself. Muriel insisted they had a spare tent and cots for Leila and Rand, and finally won them over. Rand decided it was probably as comfortable as the beds in the local inn, and the weather was perfect for sleeping outdoors.

It was close to midnight by the time Leila turned in. Rand was about to follow her when he noticed someone lurking outside near the tent. It was one of the Greek laborers, an olive-skinned man with a black mustache whom he'd noticed at the site earlier. "What do you want?" Rand asked, knowing they all spoke English.

"Mr. Rand, may I speak to you?"

"Who are you? What's your name?"

"My name is unimportant. Here I am known as Krazer. London asked me to contact you."

"I know many people in London," Rand replied, instantly on guard.

"Double-C."

"That means nothing to me."

"Parkinson? He heads up the unit. Concealed Communications. You used to be in charge until your early retirement fifteen years ago. Your good friend Hastings was forced to retire last year."

"What do you want?"

"London was surprised to learn of your presence here. You and your wife should leave the first thing in the morning. It is not a safe place."

"Why not?"

"I cannot tell you that. Parkinson wanted you warned away, for old times' sake." Krazer did not wait for a response. He faded silently into the midnight darkness and Rand was left alone.

In the morning Rand was undecided as to what they should do. He was about to tell Leila about his midnight conversation when Muriel Baker appeared at their tent, looking agitated. "Something's happened," she told them. "Professor Rimbard wants to see everyone at once."

Rand and Leila finished dressing quickly and joined the others on a hill overlooking the dig. Already they could see uniformed police officers working below, surrounding something that was hidden from their view.

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Rimbard spoke quickly, without dramatics. "One of our Greek workmen was killed during the night. Apparently it was a robbery. He was stabbed and his pockets were emptied. The police will want to talk with all of us."

"Who was it?" Quintal asked, but Rand was already aware of who was missing.

"Krazer," the professor answered. "He was a good worker."

Later, over breakfast, Leila said to Rand, "At least this is one time you're not involved."

When he didn't answer, she asked, "You're not involved, are you?"

Rand sighed and told her of his midnight conversation after she'd gone to bed. "I don't know what it means. He warned us to leave this morning and perhaps we should do just that."

"He's dead now. Surely that changes things."

He knew she wanted to remain on the dig. Finding the statue had excited her more than fifteen years of teaching in a classroom. "I'd better contact London," he decided. Calling Parkinson would be one of the most difficult things he'd ever done, but under the circumstances he had little choice. London had to be told that Krazer was dead, if they didn't know it already.

After breakfast he walked out to the row of parked cars and drove the rental down the road to the inn. As he'd guessed, there was a public telephone. Using his credit card, he dialed the country code for the United Kingdom and then the unlisted London number he still remembered from the old days.

A young woman answered. "Parkinson's Laundry," she said in a bored cockney accent.

"Tell him it's Rand, calling from Eretria. Urgent."

There was a click and he waited, absorbing the silence until Parkinson's familiar voice came on the line. "Are you safe?"

"Yes, but the phone isn't. Your man here had an accident during the night. Uncle Krazer. We're making funeral arrangements now."

"I see. You and Leila—"

"We're staying for the moment. He told me to leave last night, but I see no point in that."

Parkinson hesitated, then plunged ahead. "I told him to get you out of there, Rand. You and your wife. We feared something violent might happen, but not this, certainly!"

"Who'd be interested in an ancient Greek archaeological dig?"

"I can't say more over an unsafe line. International terrorism is involved and there could be great danger."

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"I'll get back to you," Rand said suddenly, breaking the connection. One of the young women from the site, Sadie Jones, had just walked into the inn.

"Hello there," she greeted him, smoothing her short black hair in a feminine gesture. "I came to pick up some coffee. We seem to have run out and some of them are sick of tea."

"Are the police still there?"

Sadie nodded. "They want to speak with you. The captain was a bit upset that you'd left the site before being questioned."

"I needed to phone a friend in Athens. I'm going back now."

She smiled to show it was no concern of hers. "I hope those bloody police wind up soon so we can get back to work."

Rand drove back to the dig and parked in his vacant space next to Armand Quintal's camper. The police captain frowned when he saw him, but asked only a few questions. Apparently robberies at archaeological sites were not uncommon in the region, and it was assumed that Krazer had come upon an intruder who killed and robbed him before making his escape.

When they were back in their tent, Leila asked, "Did you speak to Parkinson?"

"Briefly. Sadie Jones followed me to the telephone."

"I wonder why."

"She said they needed coffee."

"Did Parkinson tell you what was going on?"

"Very little. He mentioned terrorists, but I don't know what they'd accomplish by attacking this place. It's hardly symbolic of anything except ancient Greece."

Presently the police departed, and with them went Krazer's body. Professor Rimbard's team sat around talking for a bit, until he clapped his hands and said, "Let's get back to work."

"Should we hire a replacement for Krazer?" Muriel asked.

Rimbard considered that for a moment. "I don't believe we need to. We'll be wrapping things up in a few more days, and I'm sure Mr. Rand would give us a hand if we needed someone."

"Of course," Rand answered, envisioning himself lugging buckets of dirt.

It was Jules Lemarch who pulled him aside as the others went to work. "What do you know of this?" he asked Rand.

"I know nothing."

"Why were you sent here?"

"I came with my wife. It was her idea."

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"The man who died—he said he knew you."

"He may have known of me. Fifteen years ago I worked for the British government. I've been retired a long time."

Lemarch unconsciously fingered the tattooed number on his arm. "I swore I'd never let the bastards trample innocent people again, not after what I saw them do."

"The Nazis?"

He nodded. "Today intolerance and terrorism have different names. This whole thing is a plot to finance terrorist activities in the Middle East."

"What whole thing?" Rand wanted to know, but Lemarch had no time to reply. Quintal, the young Frenchman, called out, "We need someone down here!"

"Coming!" Lemarch replied.

As the day wore on, Rand found himself assisting Leila and the other two women brushing away the dirt from some newly discovered bones. They worked at it most of the day before Rimbard inspected their find and declared them to be animal bones, probably someone's dog buried in the recent past.

"It happens," Leila consoled Rand. "I remember digging once for months along the Nile, and it all came to nothing—a nineteenth century graveyard that had been covered in some forgotten sandstorm."

But that night as they ate, Rand's thoughts were with the man who had died, and the warning he had conveyed. If anything were to happen, it would happen soon.

Rand decided to sit up most of the night, propped against the tent pole, staring out at the darkness of the camp. He lasted for an hour before dark clouds obscured the moon and his head sagged in sleep. When he awakened, a heavy rain was falling and Leila came awake behind him. "We'll have to pump out the excavations in the morning," she muttered before drifting back to sleep.

Rand slipped back into sleep himself, to be awakened at dawn with the rising sun in his eyes and Professor Rimbard shaking him by the shoulder. "What is it?" he asked, coming fully awake.

"Someone's stolen the statue we dug up," Rimbard told him. "And Lemarch is missing."

Leila was awakened by their voices. "You certainly can't believe that old man took it!" she said, rising from the cot and rubbing her eyes. "What time is it?"

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"After six," Rimbard told them. "Get dressed and come quickly. We need everyone to search for the statue."

"It seems like every morning there's a crisis," Rand remarked when he and Leila were alone. "What could a thief hope to accomplish? The statue could be easily identified. We have pictures of it."

"Its theft from an archaeological site makes it more valuable, if anything," she explained, dressing quickly in her familiar khaki shirt and shorts. "There are collectors who would pay a fortune for such an object, even if they can never exhibit it."

The thief had stolen the keys from Rimbard's pants while he slept, and taken the kouros from his locked van. They immediately searched all the other cars, vans, and campers, but there was no statue. "We'd better search the area," Quintal suggested. "Look for evidence of recent digging. It might have been reburied."

"Why would anyone do that?" Rand wondered.

The Frenchman shrugged. "Sometimes on digs the local workmen resent the removal of their national treasures. The kouros may have been taken simply to keep it in Greece."

"Greek law would have kept it here anyway," Muriel pointed out, "at least for a time."

They spent an hour searching the area without success, walking through grass still wet from the earlier rain. By that time the local workmen had arrived, but Rimbard sent them home. "No work today! Go, go! Maybe tomorrow!"

"One of them may have stolen it," Sadie Jones speculated.

"One of them or one of us," Muriel said. She kept glancing at Professor Rimbard, as if weighing the effect of all this on his nerves. Rand wondered if they shared a tent. If they did, could the thief have entered without disturbing either of them?

"I'd better drive to a phone and summon the police," Quintal decided.

Rand walked with him to the parking area. "Do you think this is tied in with the killing of Krazer?"

"Certainly," the young Frenchman replied. "Krazer caught the thief the previous night and got stabbed for his troubles. Last night the thief finished the job."

"Jules Lemarch?"

"I can't believe that. The old man is sort of spooky, but he's not a killer." He climbed behind the wheel of his camper. "I'll be right back."

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"The inn down the road has a phone," Rand called out. He stood for a moment in the wet grass where the camper had been, then started back to the dig. Before he reached it, Leila came running up, out of breath.

"We've found Lemarch," she gasped.

She led the way across the rough terrain toward the ancient Greek theater Rand had toured with Professor Rimbard on his first day. Rimbard and the two young women were already there, grouped together at the stage entrance to the tunnel. "One of the girls remembered someplace we hadn't looked for the statue," Leila explained.

"The passageway."

"Exactly. Rimbard grabbed his flashlight and we followed. Jules Lemarch's body was about halfway along the passage."

"My God!"

"In here," Rimbard said as Rand arrived. "Follow me. The women have seen too much already."

By the flashlight's glow, Rand could see that the old man's face and body had been slashed several times. His right hand was bloodied, no doubt from fighting off the knife thrusts. Oddly, his left hand seemed closed in a tight fist.

"Quintal has gone to call the police about the robbery," Rand said. "They should arrive soon."

As he spoke, he pried apart the fingers of the dead man's left hand. Yes, there was something clutched in it. He recognized one of the metal tokens Lemarch had carried in his pocket—one of the theater tickets they'd uncovered at the site. Embossed on it was the familiar triangle of the Greek letter delta.

The police could tell very little from their preliminary examination, except that the knife wounds indicated both men might have been victims of the same killer. The fact that there was no blood on Lemarch's pants indicated he might have been knocked down first before being stabbed, and since there was no flashlight or candle by the body, it seemed likely he'd been attacked in the dark, by a killer he never saw until it was too late to cry for help. Someone following him into the passageway need only have run him down from behind, easily overtaking the older man, who could go nowhere but straight ahead.

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Several of the metal tokens had been found in Lemarch's right-hand pants pocket, where he'd carried them the previous day. "It means he chose that one to leave some sort of message," Leila said later when she was alone with Rand.

"In the dark?"

"He could feel the embossed letter with his fingers. He chose the delta to indicate his killer."

"There were only four people here, other than us."

She nodded agreement. "Professor Rimbard, Muriel Baker, Armand Quintal, and Sadie Jones."

"Not a delta in the bunch, or even a name starting with *D*."

"It's the fourth letter of the Greek alphabet. Could that mean anything?"

"I doubt it. I suppose it's always possible one of the four was educated in America and belonged to a college fraternity or sorority with Delta in its name, but it's not likely Lemarch would have known about something as remote as that."

"I'll check on it anyway."

"How?"

"The original invitation to join this dig gave everyone's academic credentials. I think I brought it with me."

She went off to their tent to check, while Rand walked over to the dig. Only Sadie Jones was there, fussing with the dirt but accomplishing little. "I can't work," she told Rand. "Two nights and two killings. My God, who'll be next?"

"I think it would be wise for us to move into town for tonight," he agreed. "If we stay here, everyone will be awake all night." Another thought occurred to him. "Was the rest of that theater passageway searched for the missing statue?"

"The kouros? It's not in there. Nothing was there except Jules—"

He could see she was close to tears. "Did you know him well?"

"Just since we came here. But after what he went through as a young man in the camps, it seems he should have ended his days in a better way."

"Did he ever talk about his early days?"

"Not much. But he was such a believer in freedom! Whenever he heard of oppression or terrorism or intolerance he wanted to strike out against it."

"He carried those metal tokens in his pocket—"

"We believe they were theater tickets."

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"Would they have any other meaning, especially one with the Greek delta on it?"

"We took it to mean the fourth row or fourth section of seats. What else could it mean?"

"I don't know," Rand admitted.

The others joined them soon after, led by the professor. "I drove to the inn and arranged for three rooms. We can't stay here. It's the best I could do for tonight. We'll have to double up some—" He glanced quickly at Muriel. "—and Armand says he can sleep in his camper."

"Do you think it's one of the workmen?" Rand asked.

"It must be, unless we're to believe it's one of us. Who else knew that we'd found the kouros?"

"Could one person have carried it?"

"I did," Rimbard replied. "I carried it to my tent and later to my van. It weighs less than forty pounds."

Rand thought about that, trying to decide where the thief might have hidden the statue. If it was one of these four, it couldn't be far. After a time, when the others had reluctantly returned to work, he slipped away and drove to the inn. He parked in front of it and went inside.

"No rooms," the clerk told him. "We just rented the last three."

There were only a dozen rooms in the small building, and it took Rand only a few moments to establish that just one had been rented the night before last, by a Turkish gentleman. That was room number six, at the back of the ground floor. Rand thanked him and went back outside. He noticed the black limousine parked behind his car and wondered what would bring a car like that to a place like Eretria. He should have known it was Parkinson.

The rear door swung open and a familiar voice said, "Hello, Jeffrey."

Rand walked over and bent to speak with him. "Hello, Parkinson. Didn't anyone ever tell you that spies aren't supposed to blow the budget on ostentatious limousines?"

"It's the ambassador's car. I borrowed it in Athens. Get in."

Rand slipped into the back seat. A driver sat up front, separated by thick glass. "You got down here fast enough."

"What's happening?"

"Jules Lemarch is dead. Was he one of yours too?"

Parkinson shook his head. "Not exactly. He contacted the embassy about the matter and we sent a local man, Krazer, in to see what was going on."

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"Terrorists?"

"Krazer believed there was one among the digging team. Apparently they've been raising money for certain Middle-Eastern operations by seeding archaeological sites with fake treasures. The statues and artifacts are then stolen before an expert can declare them fakes. Newspaper reports of the thefts are often enough to legitimize the objects, at least in the eyes of collectors operating outside the usual channels. If a statue was stolen from an Egyptian tomb or a Greek hillside in the course of a recognized archaeological dig, it's automatically a valuable object to these collectors. So a modern fake, if skillful enough, can bring a hundred thousand dollars or more."

"Why did Krazer warn me away?"

"We know a man named Bergama, from Istanbul, is to pick up the statue and smuggle it out of the country to a waiting dealer. We hoped to capture Bergama and the terrorist member of the archaeological team. Naturally we were afraid of gunplay, which is why you were warned away. Unfortunately, either the terrorist or Bergama killed both Krazer and Lemarch to protect himself."

"It wasn't Bergama," Rand said. "He isn't here yet."

Parkinson blinked. He seemed uncomfortable in his suit and tie, even though the embassy car was air-conditioned. "How do you know that?"

"A Turkish gentleman rented a room at this inn—number six—two nights ago. He has it again tonight. I think the statue is hidden there now, for Bergama to pick up. But if he'd been present to kill those two, he'd be gone already with the statue. There wouldn't be a need for a transfer point."

"You're guessing."

Rand stared at him. "I've guessed well in the past, Parkinson. I guessed well when I hired you for Concealed Communications." A compliment never hurt, even though each year had brought growing doubts about Parkinson's ability.

"What do you suggest?"

"Get this car out of sight. Do you know what Bergama looks like?"

"We have a picture."

"Good! Watch for him, but don't move in. I'm going back to the site and try to smoke out a killer." He paused, getting out of the car. "Why is London so interested in this, anyway?"

"Three British nationals are at the site, not even counting you and your wife. There's a good chance one of them is in league with the terrorists. We like to handle such things ourselves, if possible."

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Rand nodded. "I'll see you later."

Back at the dig, he waited until the afternoon break before he dropped his bombshell. He looked at Professor Rimbard across the worktable on which they were having coffee and said, "I've been thinking about the killings."

"I hope with better success than the police."

"I believe so." Muriel Baker had stopped sipping her coffee and was listening intently. He saw that Quintal and Sadie were listening too. "If you'll agree that my wife and I are not involved, the killer really has to be one of you four."

Rimbard smiled slightly. "How so? What about the workmen?"

"If the killings are connected with the theft of that statue, which seems likely, only someone skilled in archaeology would know how to go about burying it in the right position to be found. The dirt around it could not be too loose or too fresh. The—"

"Are you saying the kouros is not authentic?" Sadie asked.

"I don't believe so. It was buried here to be found, and then stolen to be sold. Krazer was killed because he knew about it, and then Lemarch was killed too. But he lived long enough to grasp one of those metal tokens and leave a dying message pointing to his killer."

"Delta?" Quintal asked. "What sort of message is that?"

"It's the fourth letter of the Greek alphabet," Muriel said, "but none of us and none of our names connect with *D* or four or delta."

"Ah, but one name does!"

They were all staring at Rand, even Leila, hanging on his next words. "Professor Rimbard," she said slowly, "and Sadie Jones, and Armand Quintal, and Muriel Baker. Not a delta in the lot, not even in French." She glanced at Quintal. "Your name suggests the number five, but not four."

"You're forgetting," Rand said, "that Professor Rimbard has a first name. We heard it just once, and that name was *Niles*. The most famous delta in the world—certainly in this part of the world—is the Nile delta."

Rimbard was on his feet. "Are you accusing me of murder?"

"No, Jules Lemarch did that, in his dying moments."

That night, after darkness had fallen once more, Rand slipped away from the site and drove to the nearby inn. He parked his car at the side of the lot and waited. Presently Parkinson appeared out of the night to join him. "What happened?"

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"I accused Professor Rimbard of killing them."

"Did he admit it?"

"No, but I think—"

Parkinson gripped his arm. "Look there! It's the Turk!"

They watched the figure moving through the lights of the parking lot, heading toward the inn. "Are your men in place?" Rand asked.

"Yes."

"Let's move, then."

But the Turk had been slower than Rand expected. He was still in the hallway outside room number six when they rushed into the corridor. "It's a trap!" he shouted, pawing for the weapon beneath his jacket.

Parkinson shoved Rand aside and fired once, just as the door of room number six sprang open. Armand Quintal was standing there, and he took the bullet in the chest.

It was over. Rand never knew what Parkinson told the Greek police, or what sort of international incident was avoided. Armand Quintal died cursing, on the way to the hospital, and the missing statue was recovered from the closet of room number six. It was up to Rand to explain things, which he did the following morning when he apologized to Professor Rimbard.

"I had to accuse you," he said, "so Quintal would think it was safe to meet the Turk at that room. It was the only way I could prove he was the killer who'd engineered this whole scheme to raise money for terrorists. When I remembered your first name was Niles, it seemed that Nile delta wasn't too farfetched. In fact, Armand probably chose that token in hopes someone would make the connection. He might have pointed it out himself if no one else did."

"But why couldn't it have been a real clue?" Leila asked. "He was clutching it in his hand, after all."

"Lemarch's right hand was cut and bloodied, yet there was no blood at all on his pants. That meant he hadn't removed the token from his right-hand pocket with his right hand. It would be virtually impossible to have removed the token with the left hand, especially when wounded and lying down. If he removed the token before he was attacked, it would have been in his right hand, not his left. No, the token clue had to be faked."

"But Quintal! How did you know he was the killer?" Rimbard wanted to know.

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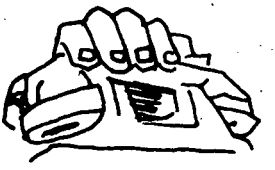
"It was a small thing," Rand acknowledged. "That was why I needed to lure him to the hotel for real proof. You see, the killer must have left our camp during the night and brought the statue to the inn. It was nowhere to be found, and if he'd given it directly to the Turk there'd have been no need for the hotel room. No one admitted being away, of course, but one person was. I noticed yesterday morning that the grass beneath Armand Quintal's camper was wet. The camper must have been away during that brief rain."

Rand and Leila returned home soon thereafter. The new term was beginning at Reading University, and Leila looked forward to the relative calm of the classroom.



DETECTIVERSE

GIVE ME A CLUE

by ELIZABETH FRAZE ARNDT

It wouldn't have been the butler—
He is to upright;
It couldn't have been the downstairs maid—
She was out all night.
It couldn't have been Great Grandmama—
She is far too feeble and old,
And it wouldn't have been Cousin Albert—
The will left him out in the cold.
Uncle George has a cast-iron alibi—
When all is said and done,
The killer must be the chauffer—
With an auto-matic gun.

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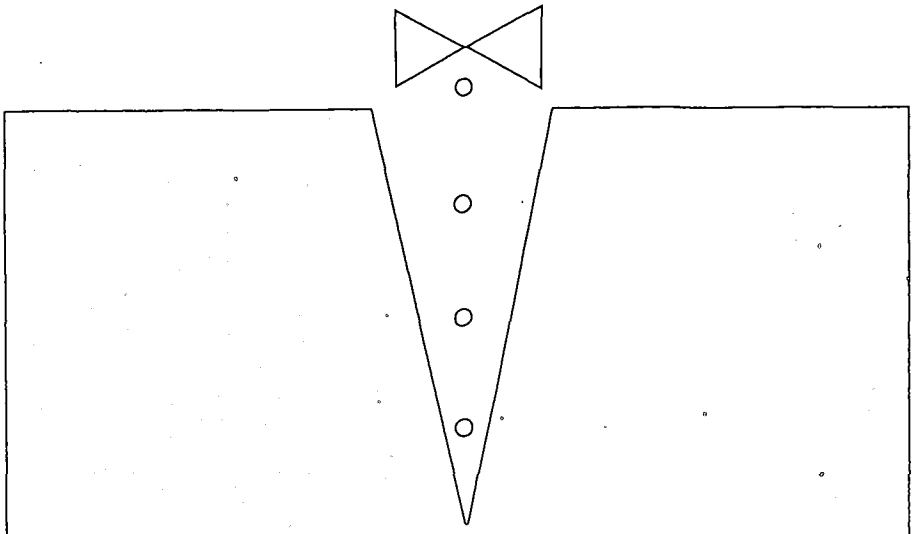

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THE JURY BOX
by JON L. BREEN

Most detective novel series feature one central protagonist, albeit often with recurring associates. A smaller number present a coequal team of sleuths—married couples like Frances and Richard Lockridge's Mr. and Mrs. North, or police teams like Reginald Hill's Dalziel and Pascoe. A relatively small number of writers have made an organization or agency the recurring element, with different members taking the forefront in different stories. The most famous example from the public sector is probably Ed McBain's 87th Precinct police procedurals, and from the private sector Joe Gores's DKA Files private-eye procedurals. In the second novel of a remarkable new series, it becomes clear we have another notable example of the group hero.

**** Warwick Downing: *The Water Cure,* Pocket Books, $4.50. The National Association of Special Prosecutors is a federal agency that provides advocates to local jurisdictions where needed. Tough female prosecutor Frankie Rommel goes to Atlanta to work on the indictment of a Vietnam war hero who turned vigilante in the war against drugs, seemingly with the approval of local law enforcement. The title refers to an interrogation (i.e. torture) method used on Vietnamese prisoners and replicated in the Atlanta deaths. Don't ignore Downing. He's producing some of the most effective and thought-provoking crime fiction being written today.

*** Gerald Petievich: *Paramour,* Dutton, $19.95. This fast-reading political/spy thriller, enhanced by the author's inside knowledge of the Secret Service, begins with a murder in the White House and follows Agent Jack Powers through a complicated and twist-filled assignment involving a woman who may be the President's mistress. It has already been acquired for film as a Ridley Scott project and should make a terrific movie. William Friedkin made a good film of Petievich's *To Live and Die in L.A.* (1984), but some of the complexities of that fine novel had to be sacrificed—this one, on the other hand, is more straightforward in plot and action, more black-and-white in characterization, has as its highlights the kind of action/suspense scenes that scintillate on film, and may make an even better movie than it does a novel.

*** Ken Follett: *Night Over Water,* Morrow, $23.00. Speaking of potential screen material, this best-selling thriller is another natural. In 1939, the last luxurious trans-Atlantic flight of the Flying Clipper seaplane has a passenger list you can almost cast by the numbers: a lawman transporting a prisoner, a society jewel thief, an escaping British fascist with a left-

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minded daughter, a famous Zionist, a woman fleeing her husband. My Follett expert assures me this is a potboiler by the author's standards, far from his best work and a particular letdown after his ambitious historical *Pillars of the Earth*. Still, it's nicely choreographed, especially the finale with its interlocking disclosures and elements of Feydeau farce played straight. Readers like me who can't resist the flying Grand Hotel motif are sure to enjoy it.

*** John Lutz: *Hot*, Holt, $18.95. Florida private eye Fred Carver, a happier man these days having acquired a strong romantic partner in his last appearance, travels to the Keys to check out a retired lawman's wealthy neighbor, who may be up to no good. This is another highly readable and involving Lutz novel, as usual more notable for style and characterization than for plot.

With so much good mystery and crime fiction being published, how does the overwhelmed consumer decide what to read? Apart from perusing review columns like this one, you can sample novelists' shorter works in magazines like *EQMM* and *AHMM* or in the currently plentiful original anthologies. There are pitfalls in this: novelists are not always good short-story writers, and often when they do essay shorter lengths, they desert their series characters to produce material quite different in approach from their books. Several recent anthologies serve the sampler function by including short stories from established book-length series.

Demonstrating that the line between toughs and cozies is a wavering one, most of the series characters in the domestic sounding *Cat Crimes* (Fine, $18.95), edited by Martin H. Greenberg and Ed Gorman, are private eyes: Bill Pronzini's Nameless (in a more comic tale than usual, including a wonderful new euphemism to replace senior citizen: the "chronologically gifted"), David H. Everson's Midcontinental Op Robert Miles, and (in especially strong form) Les Roberts's Saxon. Others present include Bill Crider's Sheriff Dan Rhodes and my own Jerry Brogan. (Lest you suspect a masculine bias, among the non-series contributors are Joan Hess, Dorothy B. Hughes, Barbara Paul, and J.A. Jance.)

Maxim Jakubowski's *New Crimes 3* (Carroll & Graf, $18.95), also has Nameless (in "Souls Burning," a story already published here in another anthology), and the only short-story appearance of Robert B. Parker's Spenser, previously published as a limited edition chapbook. "Surrogate" is far from prime Spenser—it could be a parody of the sensitive and politically correct P.I. tale—but it's still a better story than reputed. In "Lord Peter and the Butter Boy," Mike Ripley's cabdriver-sleuth Angel encounters an older hackie who claims to have driven Lord Peter Wimsey. (A very funny non-series entry, Jack Adrian's locked-room send-up "The Absolute and Utter Impossibility of the Facts in the Case of the Vanishing of Henning Vok," also illustrates the vol-

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ume's leaning toward parody.)

Charlotte MacLeod's second yuletide anthology, *Christmas Stalkings* (Mysterious, $17.95), opens with her own Peter Shandy facing a typically wacky situation: the face of Balaclava College's president turns up on a counterfeit $20 bill. This story should be a reliable litmus test if you haven't tried MacLeod. If it appeals to you, you'll love her novels. If you find it all a bit too cute, you won't. Also present are Crider's English professor Carl Burns, playing department store Santa to try to spot a shoplifter, and Evelyn E. Smith's black-comedy assassin Miss Melville, who will probably appeal to the same readers as the editor. A non-series story I especially enjoyed is Elizabeth Peters's brilliant parody of the new-style female shamuses, "Liz Peters, P.I.," which illustrates her debatable contention that most of them are guys in drag.

Marilyn Wallace's *Sisters in Crime 4* (Berkley, $4.99) has Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone and Marcia Muller's Sharon McCone in reprints and, in originals, Margaret Maron's Sigrid Harald (a clever impossible crime puzzle), Mary Bowen Hall's Emma Chizzit (a brightly amusing domestic mystery for the likeable Sacramento salvage dealer), and Linda Grant's Catherine Sayler (especially impressive in an affecting exploration of suspicious deaths in a nursing home).

A Suit of Diamonds (Dell, $4.50), originally published in Great Britain in 1990 in celebration of the Collins Crime Club Diamond Jubilee, has Sarah Caudwell's Hilary Tamar (in an elegant and charming legal mystery), Charlotte MacLeod's Kelling family (I for one find Aunt Hypatia much more agreeable company than Peter Shandy), John Malcolm's Tim Simpson, Michael Pearce's Captain Owen, and (in presumably more typical form) Ripley's Angel.

Reprint anthologies will also serve the series shopper: Edward D. Hoch's *The Year's Best Mystery and Suspense Stories 1991* (Walker, $19.95), which features all five Edgar-nominated short stories for best of 1990 (topped by Lynne Barrett's impressive winner, "Elvis Lives," from *EQMM*) includes stories about Grafton's Millhone, Pronzini's Nameless, Ruth Rendell's Inspector Wexford, Donald E. Westlake's Dortmunder (funny as ever while uncharacteristically playing a detective rather than criminal role), and in an especially strong courtroom story Carolyn Wheat's Cass Jameson, while *Alfred Hitchcock's Home Sweet Homicide* (Walker, $18.95), edited by Cathleen Jordan, reprints *AHMM* stories about four of the best current private eyes, all in good form: Muller's McCone, Loren D. Estleman's Amos Walker, John Lutz's Nudger, and Lawrence Block's Matt Scudder.

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Robert Cenedella has appeared twice before in EQMM, *once with a cunning tale of trickery and deception ("The Last Treasure," November 1961), and later with a biting satire ("The Novelist and the Critic," May 1966). The following story finds him in a gentler comic mood, out to captivate with his own brand of honey . . .*

FLIES WITH HONEY

by ROBERT CENEDELLA

This morning, Myra Burns had taken more care than usual with every detail of her ablutions, carefully dressing in her maroon open-necked top and her light-blue skirt, brushing and combing back her still naturally light-brown hair, and choosing comfortable beige pumps. Her breakfast—tea and half a toasted English—she made less carefully because she was by then thinking of other things, of how she would behave with Hazel Mooney Beecher on this portentous day.

By the time the phone rang, she might have been already gone but for the fact that she had found it necessary to run up the stairs three times in order to look at herself, head to toe, in the full-length mirror on the back of her bathroom door.

"Foolish!" she said to herself, descending the stairs for the third time. "Just darn foolish, that's all!"

At which point the phone rang, and she went down the last two steps and on into her living room, where, picking up the phone as she sank into her easy chair, she said, "Hello?"

"Ms. Burns? Myra Burns? Ed Tuttle here. From the home office here in Bassington? Ed Tuttle?"

"Why, goodness, yes, Mr. Tuttle. How are you?"

"Never mind how am I. I've just been looking over some papers here and there, and, well, I see that about eight, ten years ago . . . Let's see, *eleven*. Yeah, eleven years ago you wrote up a whole life policy for this what's his name, Wesley Beecher."

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"Oh, yes, that's right."

"Well, he's the guy that committed suicide here in Bassington two weeks ago, right? You saw that in the county paper, right?"

"Oh my, yes, I did. And oh, Mr. Tuttle, I was so sorry! Wes Beecher and I were good friends, I mean very good, back when, well, when he wasn't married yet, and . . ."

"Fine. Fine. Fine. But I got no time to waste. It's just, look, the time has long gone when we wouldn't be responsible in case of suicide. Two years, that would be, and this is *eleven* years. And I mean, where's the claim? Didn't the widow claim the insurance money?"

"Mr. Tuttle, I'm on my way to see her now."

"Oh, she did get in touch with you then."

"No. Not yet. But I'm going to see her over there in Bassington, and tell her about . . . I mean, ask her to sign a claim form and all like that."

"Oh. All right. You know her, do you?"

"Well . . . Well, but I mean her husband, Wes, why, he and I grew up together here in Wellford, but he left when he married that Hazel Mooney, and I stayed here, and but so of course I wrote up his insurance. A whole one hundred thousand dollar policy, my goodness."

"You knew he'd died, didn't you? Committed suicide?"

"Dear me, yes. I always read the obituaries every day. Not for business reasons, like you, but just for news of old friends. I mean, I'm only just past forty, more or less, but you'd be surprised how many of my old friends, I mean, well . . ."

"Ms. Burns, you're going to see the widow today?"

"Uh . . . Yes, that's right."

"Well, on your way. We wouldn't want you to miss the bus now, would we?"

Myra Burns had no intention of missing the bus, and she didn't, even though after her phone conversation, she took time to remove from her tote bag the packet of insurance claim forms she always carried in it. She put them in the underwear drawer of her bureau and left without them.

But she caught the bus, and left it at Bassington, and walked the fourteen blocks to the address of Wesley Beecher—or rather, of his widow—and stopped for a moment on the sidewalk, first to look curiously at a car with a doctor's plate attached to it, parked in the Beechers' driveway; then to pat her hair (which, darn it, turned out

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to be her hat); and then to smooth her skirt and to walk six steps up the concrete walk between the two rows of bushes, and four steps up the stairs to the porch, and three steps to the front door, where, after again smoothing her skirt, she rang the bell, and, yes, again smoothed her skirt.

The door opened, and there was a man facing her.

"Yes?" he said.

"Sorry," said Myra. "I mean, I didn't expect . . . I mean, I came to see Mrs. Beecher? Hazel? Hazel Mooney Beecher?"

"Oh. Well. I'm Dr. Nash, her physician, and—"

"Oh, gosh whillikers! She sick? I mean, I wanted to tell her how sorry I am about, well, poor dear Wesley . . ."

"You're a friend of Hazel's? Er . . . Mrs. Beecher's?"

"Well, gee whizz, that's funny, you know, I never met her, but well, I mean, Wesley and me, we grew up together, and . . . well . . ."

"I see. Well, Mrs. Beecher's too ill to see anyone right now. I'll give her your condolences."

"My . . . ? Oh, con-*do*-lences! Yes. Well, thank you, Mr. Doctor, and, well, I mean, but . . ."

"I'll tell her you called."

Dr. Nash started to close the door, but Myra said, "Oh, but wait a minute! Please! It's, I mean, important . . ."

"Oh? Well?"

"I forgot to tell you I'm an insurance agent, sort of. Funny, it's something I just do for a living, so I'm always forgetting about it, isn't that the limit? And I wrote a policy up for poor dear Wesley, and, well, I mean it's for a hundred, my goodness, thousand dollars, and . . . Wait a minute . . ." She was poking into her tote bag, just as if the claim form were there. "Now, where is that consarned claim form . . . ?"

The Doctor said: "Well, now, Mrs., er, Whatever, I think—"

"It's *Miss* Whatever," said Myra. "Miss Burns. My goodness, I never married . . ."

"Miss Burns. Well. I guess this is a matter of real importance, so . . . If you want to come in, I suppose Mrs. Beecher can see you for a bit. I'll have to stay with you, though, in case . . . Well." He pulled the door wide open, and stepped back to give Myra room.

"Thank you," she said, and stepped into a front hallway with a staircase just ahead of her—and though the doctor was stepping toward a closed door beyond which was surely a living room, Myra started up the stairs.

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"No!" The doctor stopped her. "No, Miss Burns. Mrs. Beecher is in the living room, in here."

"Oh," said Myra. "I thought she was sick, and I mean in bed maybe, or . . ."

"No. She can sit up. Just a minute." He opened the door to the living room just a crack, and peeked in. He said, "Hazel, there's a woman here I think you should see, even though you're *sick*. I—ah—I told her you're *sick*. But I thought you should see her, because this is about insurance. An insurance policy that we . . . that you didn't know about, apparently. So settle down . . . That's it. That's fine . . ." He opened wide the door, and stepping aside, motioned with his arm for Myra to enter.

Myra did.

And there on a couch across the room, half reclining, with drapes and window panes behind her, was a woman in grey slacks and sweat shirt, her black hair pulled up and held like a tiara by a pink ribbon. She looked as though she were ready to go jogging.

"Hazel Mooney?" said Myra. "I mean Beecher. Hazel Mooney Beecher?"

"Yes," said Hazel Mooney Beecher.

"Don't strain yourself now," said the doctor.

"Wes and I were old friends," said Myra. "Grew up together. Very close *close* friends, and my goodness, I was so shocked when I heard about . . . well . . . his death . . ."

"His suicide," said the doctor.

"Goodness," said Myra, "I couldn't believe it. When I read about it, all I could think of was how healthy Wes always was. I mean, right tackle and all. That was on the football team in high school, or the basketball or something. The one where they wear those shoulder pads. Not that Wes ever needed shoulder pads with those big shoulders of his, my goodness . . . ."

"I don't like to talk about this," said Hazel Mooney Beecher.

"Of course, of course. Oh, but do you know, when I read about it in the paper, I thought, my goodness, there musta been a mistake, because I mean *Thursday!* Every Thursday Wes used to go . . . Well, when I knew him, I mean, he used to go Thursdays to the art auctions over in Wellford, and but I mean, Thursdays were sacred to him! Oh, but well, I suppose that was way back then . . ."

Hazel said: "He didn't want to go that Thursday night."

"That's right," said Dr. Nash. "He said so."

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"Er, ah, Dr. Nash was here that night," said Hazel. "He was a dinner guest."

"Yes," said the doctor. "And he said he wouldn't go into the city, said he didn't feel well. I offered to examine him, but he said no and just went up to bed."

"And that's when, well, I mean," said Myra, "that's when he took the sleeping pills, huh?"

"Yes."

"It wasn't just you, it was the medical examiner said so, right? Dr. Crawford?"

"Yes. He made the examination, and he said suicide. All right?"

"Oh, sure. Funny, I used to know Dr. Crawford, too. Amos Crawford, right? He's still medical examiner here?"

"Yes. Yes, Dr. Crawford. Now look here, I . . ."

"Gee whillikers! Gotta give him credit! He must be eighty-five years old by now!"

"He's fairly old, yes. Now, look here, let's get this insurance matter over with. That's why I let you in to see Mrs. Beecher, you know."

"Oh! Yes! Sure, yes, sure, all *righty!* Of course! Ah . . . Mrs. Beecher, did you know Wesley took out a, well, one hundred thousand dollar life insurance policy?"

"What? No. No, I didn't."

"Well, he did. And, oh, I suppose he came to me for it because we used to be such good, well, close *friends*, I mean. Gosh, yes. Why, he told me about you, Mrs. Hazel, right after he met you. It was your parents and his that arranged the meeting, wasn't it?"

"Our parents were friends, yes."

"I remember how suitable his parents thought the match would be. And my goodness, you can't blame them! I mean, the social position of your family and all . . ."

Dr. Nash said: "The *insurance,* Miss Burns?"

"Oh, yes, yes. Let me get the claim forms . . . er . . . ah . . ." She was searching in the tote bag. "Goodness," she said, and brought out her purse. "Oh, my," she said, and brought out her check book. Then she dug in again and—"Golly!"—brought out a candy bar. Finally, after more probing: "Why, think of that! They're not here."

The doctor and Hazel Mooney Beecher looked at each other, shook their heads—were about to speak, each of them, when Myra cut in to say that gosh almighty, she'd have to come back with the claim forms, and would Monday be all right, and she was sorry, but okay Monday? And they said well, it would have to be, and she left.

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* * *

When Myra got home, she immediately took the claim forms from the underwear drawer and put them back in her tote bag. Then she wandered aimlessly about the house, because after all, she had to wait until Monday, didn't she?

Well, that was true, except for one thing. She could call Ed Tuttle now. It was only four o'clock, about, and she could catch him in the office and set up what she had to set up.

So she called him. And, yes, got him.

"Ah!" he said. "Got that claim form filled out?"

"Well, no," said Myra. "I, ah, forgot it."

"*Forgot* it?!"

"Well," she said, "there's no harm done, because, well, look, Mr. Tuttle, I'm going back there on Monday, and, well, I mean, I'd like you to come with me."

"Huh? Why? What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about you coming with me. Monday. They're right there in Bassington, I mean *she* is, and I could go to your office, pick you up, and we could be at their place, I mean *her* place, in fifteen minutes."

"But why?"

"Why? Oh, well, I mean, let's see, I'm this person that knew poor dear Wes, and maybe I'll get to crying or something, but— Well, there's another reason, too, Mr. Tuttle, and could you please? I mean *please?*"

He grudgingly said all right, and they both hung up, and Myra waited and waited for the weekend to come, and then for the weekend to go, and finally, on Monday, having checked with Mr. Tuttle as to what time would be most convenient for him, she took the bus to Bassington, went to the home office of the insurance company, picked up a grumbling Mr. Ed Tuttle, and at 2:15 P.M. rode with him in his car to the home of Hazel Mooney Beecher.

Dr. Nash's car was again (or still) in the Beecher driveway, and as Myra and Ed Tuttle walked toward the porch, Myra told him whose car that was. He shrugged, and went toward the doorbell, ready to ring it, but Myra quickly stepped between him and the door.

"No! No! Don't ring yet, Mr. Tuttle," she said, and as he started to speak, she interrupted. "Just listen, all right? When we get in there, don't say anything. You just sit back and let me do the talking, all right?"

"What *is* this?"

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"This is *let me do the talking,*" she said, and turned and rang the bell.

It was Dr. Nash who opened the door to them, and though he was surprised to see Ed Tuttle, he quickly let them in, and ushered them into the living room.

Hazel Mooney Beecher was sitting where she had been during Myra's previous visit, but this time wearing a blue dress, with a rather long pearl necklace draping from her neck.

When the introductions were over, Hazel said, "Well, we didn't expect a delegation."

"I'm just an official of the insurance company, ma'am," said Ed Tuttle.

"Yes," said Myra, giving him a look. "Mr. Tuttle is just going to sit back and let me do the talking."

Dr. Nash said: "This is very harrowing for Mrs. Beecher."

"Still and all, doctor," said Myra, "she has you with her."

Hazel made an impatient gesture. "Let's get on with it, shall we?" she said. "I assume I have to sign some sort of form."

"Well," said Myra, "not right away. Not without my telling you that our insurance company has asked the police to exhume poor dear Wes's body for a post-mortem examination."

Dr. Nash said: *"What!?"*

"You can't do that!" said Hazel.

And Ed Tuttle started saying, "Now, see here, Ms. Burns—" but Myra interrupted.

"I know, Mr. Tuttle," she said quickly. "But I think it's best to tell them right out like this. You said you'd let me handle it."

Dr. Nash said: "Miss Burns, I personally examined the late Mr. Beecher's body—and more to the point, so did the medical examiner."

"With you present, right?" said Myra.

"He issued a certificate," said the doctor. "And now, look here, Mrs. Beecher's health will not stand the strain of such a procedure."

Hazel Mooney Beecher said: "Digging up my poor husband's body! I won't have it!"

"Well," said Myra, "of course it's not absolutely necessary. Goodness gracious, from our company's point of view, there's no need of a post-mortem, under certain circumstances. I mean, well, if Mrs. Beecher wanted to, well, you know, just renounce her claim to the insurance, why, naturally the insurance company wouldn't have

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any reason to dig poor dear Wesley up. That's true, isn't it, Mr. Tuttle?"

"Oh. Well. Hmm . . . yes," said Ed Tuttle. "I guess that's right."

Hazel rose. "*Renounce* my claim to the insurance?"

Dr. Nash spoke quickly. "Hazel—Mrs. Beecher—you're feeling faint, aren't you?"

"I'll be all right, Steve, but—*renounce my claim?*"

"Hazel," the doctor said, "I think you and I had better go, well, out there to the kitchen. Perhaps I'd better take your pulse . . ." He put his hand on her arm. "Come, my dear," he said.

"Oh. Yes. Yes. Ah . . . excuse us, please."

The two left the room.

And as they left, Myra, standing, turned to watch them. But presently she felt Ed Tuttle's hands on her arms as he turned her around. His face showed alarm.

"Ms. Burns, what are you trying to do?"

"Why, good heavens, Mr. Tuttle, I'm trying to do what poor Wesley would want me to do."

"You know our company hasn't ordered an exhumation!"

"Dear me, why, of course I know that. That's why I have you here. With you here, they can't help but believe me."

"We have no cause for suspicion, Ms. Burns."

"Oh, I think we have," said Myra. "Just wait till they come back."

They had to wait a good fifteen minutes. Myra sat, but Ed Tuttle paced, turning toward her from time to time, his hand out as though he were about to say something; but then he would turn and pace once again. Time after time.

Finally, the doctor and Hazel Mooney Beecher came through the door which led to the kitchen—came slowly, turning two or three times to look at each other. Dr. Nash helped Hazel to her seat on the sofa, then turned to face Tuttle and Myra.

"Mrs. Beecher and I have been talking . . . er . . . about the effect of all this on her health," said Dr. Nash, "and she has something to tell you." He turned to Hazel Mooney Beecher. "Right, Mrs. Beecher?"

"Yes," she said, and looked at Myra and Tuttle. "On the advice of my physician," she declaimed, "I've decided to renounce my claim to the insurance money." Then, bitterly, "Is that satisfactory?"

"Perfectly," said Myra, but with raised eyebrows. She looked expectantly at Ed Tuttle.

"Well!" said Tuttle, rising, arms akimbo. "It's not satisfactory to me!"

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"What do you mean?" said Dr. Nash.

"I mean that I'm a citizen as well as an insurance official, and I want you people to know that I'm going to inform the police that you have given up a hundred thousand dollars rather than let Mr. Beecher's remains be examined."

Hazel screamed.

Dr. Nash went to her. "Quiet, Hazel! The medical examiner—"

"The medical examiner," said Myra, "is an old old man, and you, Dr. Nash, were *helping* him—if that's the word for it."

"Wait a minute," said Hazel Mooney Beecher. "Look. Even without that hundred thousand dollars, I have quite a bit of money. Now, if . . . well . . . we all cooperated . . ."

"That's it," said Myra. "That's it. You killed him, didn't you? I knew it. I knew it before I came here last week. You killed Wesley Beecher. You never loved him, and he never loved you. He was forced into marriage by his parents, and you—you didn't accept the bargain you had made. No. You had to intrigue with Dr. Nash here—*sleep* with Dr. Nash and intrigue with him so that he'd give Wes a lethal injection and then make a senile old man think it was sleeping pills. You did this to the man I loved. And oh, when they pull the switch to send you and your lover here to death for this thing you've done, there'll be glory in my heart, do you understand?"

Dr. Nash and Hazel sank back onto the sofa, and Hazel began to cry—and Nash did not put his comforting arm around her, but just stared aghast into space.

As for Ed Tuttle, he was irrelevantly saying to himself, "I never before heard Myra speak without saying 'I mean' and 'Er . . .' and 'Ah . . .' "

Later, after they had called the police and Ed Tuttle was kindly driving Myra home to Wellford, she thanked him for his interest in Wes Beecher's insurance policy.

"I knew they had killed him," she said, "but I couldn't have caught them if it wasn't for that insurance policy. I mean, flies with honey, right?"

One thing still puzzled Ed. How had she been so sure, how had she *known?*

"Oh, because he didn't show up that Thursday night," she said. "I mean, he wouldn't commit suicide on Thursday. Thursday was what he lived for. I mean, every Thursday night throughout that miserable marriage of his, he had a date with me." ●

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a ***NEW*** short story by

WILLIAM BANKIER

In the 1590s, after a period in Rheims spying for Elizabeth I on the exiled Catholics who plotted to overthrow her, the great poet and dramatist Christopher Marlowe became connected with a poetic circle known as the "school of night." The group, which also included Sir Walter Raleigh, soon became notorious for its critical interpretation of scripture and gained for its members a reputation as atheists. Historians speculate that Marlowe's violent death in 1593 may have resulted from his association with the "school of night." If this sounds like the stuff of fiction, read on. In the hands of William Bankier the story provides the seed for an offbeat and imaginative conjecture—and a fine story too!

DEATH OF A NOVERINT

by WILLIAM BANKIER

Peter Falconer coughed and closed the window. "It's stopped raining," he said. "I think I'll go out and busk beside St. Paul's." He found his shawm under some scribbled pages on the writing desk. Moistening the split reed as well as he could with lips that were dry from the fever, he blew a trill. "Betty? Did you hear what I said?"

She was angry with him because he had failed to persuade Guy Kempton to bring them with him to Richmond. "I heard. You'll be lucky if you collect a penny."

He wound a long scarf around his neck and struck a pose. It was the way he had stood last year when she gave it to him, having worked on it whenever she was not serving ale at the inn. Back then, she clapped her hands and her angel's face beamed under the halo of yellow hair. Now, she cast a frown from the couch where

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she lay sprawled under a cloud of smoke from her tiny silver pipe. Falconer inwardly cursed Raleigh for bringing back the weed from Virginia—and Kit Marlowe for giving them the pipe.

"I'm off," he said, chop-fallen.

"You'll kill yourself that much sooner."

"Don't blame me, Betty. I did my best with Guy. And don't blame Guy. His father drew the line. He'll accommodate his own son, but he dreads others bringing the plague from London."

"Friendship dies easy," was her comment.

Falconer stood in the doorway. He used the scarf to blot sweat from his cheek, discreetly. She was not watching. "Will you be here when I get back?"

"If you get back." Then, as he was groping his way down the dark stairs, the door burst open and she called, "Will you play something pretty?"

"I'll play the one you like," he said. "The galliard written by the Queen's father. They always pay to hear that."

It was a funny old time to live in London. Peter Falconer, who had been here for all but twelve of his twenty-seven years, missed the usual turmoil. It was said that ten thousand had died in the past year. Leaving Ludgate Lane, heading for St. Paul's along streets nearly bereft of people, he could believe the death toll.

If a man might live a few more years, make it through to 1600, would everything be all right? Surely the wheel would turn. The plague would be over and done with.

A poster fluttered on a damp stone wall as Falconer shuffled past. He stopped to stare at it. As he rubbed his eyes, the scrawled lines swam into focus. They were poorly drawn in the opinion of a skilled noverint such as himself.

> "You strangers that inhabit in this land,
> Note this same writing, do it understand;
> Conceive it well for safeguard of your lives,
> Your goods, your children, and your dearest wives."

With all his problems, Falconer realized he could be worse off. He could be the target of this threatening verse—one of the Huguenots newly arrived from Flanders, seeking the protection of England's Protestant Queen while facing the enmity of much of the local population. Feeling guilty for no reason he could fathom, Falconer moved

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on. Some said there would be riots. Without the plague sapping so much energy, there might have been before now.

The bookstalls were busy in St. Paul's churchyard. You could count on people gathering here, as long as London had people. And the publishers would never stop publishing. Something about printed pages stirs in man a sense of immortality. Well, the mice would soon devour the paper, and there went your immortality. But it was a striving in that direction, Falconer believed. Not that he wrote anything himself. He only made clear copies of what other men wrote.

"Young Peter! Mind how you go!"

Falconer caught himself for he had, indeed, staggered. He turned and saw the distinguished figure of Christopher Marlowe. The famous poet was wearing a velvet cloak, drawn back to reveal the handle of the rapier at his side.

"I never thought to see you back in London," Falconer said.

"I come and go." Marlowe sniffed a clove-studded orange balanced in a gloved hand. "I don't stay."

"They said you were holed up with Walsingham in that pile of stone at Scadbury."

"You should flee this town yourself, Peter." Sensitive eyes displayed concern as Marlowe observed the tall, pale man before him. In height and general build, the two resembled each other. "While you can."

"I've been considering several offers." Falconer's laugh degenerated into a chesty wheeze.

Somebody inside the stall was trying to get Marlowe's attention. Falconer recognized Blount, the publisher. The poet signalled his availability in a moment. He said to the noverint, "I've a job for you."

"All donations gratefully received."

"Do you know the Anchor? On Bankside, close to Rose Alley, near the theater?"

"Ask me another. I've been thrown out of more taverns than you've had hot dinners."

"Meet me there at three o'clock." Marlowe used both hands to straighten Falconer's battered felt hat. "It's good pay, young Peter. I can promise you that."

Falconer went home, discarding the idea of busking that day. There was now money he could count on. Marlowe would never let

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him down. Why waste his breath blowing tunes for people who didn't care? When breath might so soon be cut off.

The door was propped open when he passed the inn. They were drunk inside, singing at eleven o'clock in the morning. Falconer saw Betty behind the bar in conversation with the owner, a Yorkshireman with arms like thighs.

She met him at the door; he knew better than to bring his symptoms inside. "You made your fortune quickly," she said.

"I'm going upstairs. To rest for an hour."

"You should never have gone out." Betty drew the scarf up across his chin. The backs of her fingers smoothed his ruffled hair.

"I saw Kit Marlowe. He's giving me a job. I'm to collect the work at three. At Rose Alley."

"That's over the bridge. You can't walk that far."

"I'll rest. Kit says the pay is good."

Betty was reassured but she said anyway, "You'll end up in Newgate. He'll have you killing people, that troublemaker."

"It was never true. Tom Watson killed Bradley, and it was self-defense. Marlowe just happened to be there."

"Calm down. I hate to see you get excited." She raised her voice in answer to the Yorkshireman's summons. "I'm coming!" Then she turned Falconer like a child and patted him on his way. "Slowly up the stairs. Be careful. I won't see you until you get back."

Falconer raised a hand in silent farewell, making his exit around the corner like Tamburlaine himself in that glorious production years ago. He and Kempton were getting paid to make music in the pit. They had just met Marlowe and it seemed that the good times were going to last forever.

He lay in Betty's hollow on the couch. The smell of ripe tobacco was sweet but he sensed it must be poison. Some day, surely, it would be forbidden to smoke. He wished he had Marlowe's orange to counteract the plague. All he had was Kellwaye's pamphlet. He snatched it from the floor and blinked at the index page. Botch—the general cure thereof. Carbunkle—how to know him. Chickens—how to apply them.

Peter's eyes began to close. The pamphlet fell. He was back in the thatched cottage outside Oxford, seven years old, seated at a refectory table in light from the open door, being taught to read by Falconer, his adoptive father. It was a rare opportunity for an orphan. Peter had never known his parents. Falconer held an adminis-

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trative position at the university. He began instructing the boy when he became aware of his sketching talent and his quick mind.

Falconer's true son, Jason, heavy and dull at age ten, was watching from the doorway. His cold blue eyes were half closed, the lower lip hung wetly.

Jason and his jealousy turned out to be Peter's ticket to London. As the boys grew older, exchanges became more physical. Peter was never a match for his brother. A bloody nose was one thing. The softly uttered threat of murder was another. "I'll beat your bloody brains out!" They were in the stable and Jason was holding an iron shoe.

That night, Peter packed ink pot, quills, and scrivener's knife, tied the copper coins he had saved in the corner of a kerchief, then set out after dark for Winchester. He was twelve years old.

Cartwheels racing over cobblestones in Ludgate Lane woke Peter up. There was a chorus of angry shouting. A woman was cursing in pain. Men were running after the offending vehicle, trying to get the driver to stop. Peter went to the window and looked down. They were lugging the woman away, one leg dragging. Drivers cared nothing for people in the street these days. It was every man for himself. Sauve qui peut.

The remainder of a joint of ham was on the sideboard, protected by a tin lid. Betty was able to rescue such items once in a while from downstairs. Peter was not hungry but he swallowed a few scraps and drank half a bottle of ale. His throat felt sore.

Down on the street, heading for the bridge, his spirits rose. Kit's assignment would give him something to do. He loved the smell of ink, the scratching sound of a quill's tip on paper. For too long, Peter had been idle, bereft of work in a city where many projects had been postponed due to the plague. Now his mind would be occupied. And with the money in his pocket, he and Betty could leave London. They might travel south into the Kentish hills where the air was fit to breathe.

Passing under the archway and entering the first multi-storied structure on London Bridge, Peter almost bumped into Guy Kempton, who was coming out. His friend was obviously embarrassed to see him. "Cheer up, Guy. It may never happen."

The portly musician clutched a framed portrait of a young man. "My father," he said, holding it up to pale sunlight. "When he was nineteen. It was damaged by mildew. I've had it retouched."

"He'll like that."

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"He'd better. It cost me enough." Then, after a pause, "Peter, are you all right? You don't look all right."

"I'm soon to prosper. I'm on my way to see Marlowe about some work he wants done."

"Be careful. I wouldn't touch Marlowe with a barge pole."

"The Star Chamber? They questioned him and let him go. He's too important, got too many friends in high places."

"The Tower of London is a high place," Kempton said gloomily.

Falconer laughed. "That's the way, keep your sense of humor. You'll need it in Richmond when the old gentleman begins to drive you mad."

"I wish you and Betty could have come. I'd have given anything, truly."

"It wasn't your decision, Guy. We both know that."

As the young men parted, Kempton called, "You must flee London, Peter!"

"Give me a week," Falconer replied. "I'll be so far away you'll never hear from me again."

The Anchor seemed to be deserted. Falconer moved along Maiden Lane to the corner of Rose Alley. The empty theater was in sight, no flag flying from the staff atop the turret. And here came Christopher Marlowe at his usual vigorous pace and with him, the dashing figure of his friend and patron, Tom Walsingham.

"Good, you found us," Marlowe said. "They've closed the inn for fear of the pox."

"There's not much trade," Falconer conceded.

Walsingham said, "What was it Raleigh told me the other night? The coward dies a thousand times, the brave man dies but once."

"Raleigh steals most of what he says." Marlowe produced a rolled sheaf of manuscript. "This is what I want you to copy, young Peter. Will you be able to read my writing?"

The noverint scanned the familiar scrawl, finding the title page. "You surprise me, Kit," he said.

"Speak your mind."

"This play is censored. Banned. The Master of the Revels says *The Book of Sir Thomas More* cannot be produced." Falconer's heart was pounding. "Even I know that."

"Are we asking you to produce it?" Walsingham asked politely.

Mocking Falconer's alarm ever so gently, Marlowe said, "Your Master of the Revels did not say the play could not be worked over

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and improved. In any case, I'm only asking you to copy these lines in your elegant hand."

It intrigued Falconer to see how similar the young men were. Even though Walsingham belonged to the landed gentry, while Marlowe was the son of a Canterbury shoemaker. "I was concerned for your safety," he said. "But you appear long for his world."

"On the contrary," the poet said cheerfully. "There is a persistent feeling within me that I shall be dead before the week is out."

"I don't find that funny," Falconer said.

"Nor do I," murmured Walsingham.

Marlowe was searching inside his purse. He brought out a number of coins, handing them to the noverint. "Still, I feel it. And that is why I am paying you half in advance."

Falconer could hardly comprehend the money he was holding. It came to nearly three pounds. "This is far too much!"

"No, it is only enough." The poet remembered something. "That plus the other half to be paid on delivery is what I received for the completed script of *Tamburlaine the Great*. I had just arrived in London from Cambridge and handed it to The Lord Admiral's Company."

"One tenth would be more than generous."

"Don't argue with me, young Peter. I want you to have the money. Now get you home and get to work."

Falconer was moving away when he thought to ask, "Where would you have me deliver the finished pages?"

"We'll be at Scadbury," Tom Walsingham said. "It's twelve miles, we'll send someone. Don't even consider coming there."

"You'll never survive the journey," Betty scolded, dropping a shawl across his shoulders for protection against the damp night air. Falconer was working at his desk. She tipped her head to admire the fine dark flow of script. His hand trembled like a bird's wing to and from the ink pot. But when he applied quill to paper, it became steady as a rock.

Falconer could feel strength dribbling out of him like the last half inch of wine from a broken cask. The pox on his chest had spread to his neck; he wore his shirt collar turned up. With the dryness inside his mouth, it was not easy to speak. He could imagine his tongue soon beginning to swell.

There would be no escaping to the Kentish hills, he and Betty with their worldly goods bundled. They had ceased talking about it.

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Even the move to Richmond with Guy Kempton would have come too late. They both knew it.

"Nearly done!" He was on the final page of Marlowe's scrawl. "I want you to use this money to get out of London."

"We'll talk about that when we've got the other half."

"It will be in my hand tomorrow afternoon."

"The journey is too far," she argued for the tenth time.

"I mean to have that money," Falconer said flatly. "You've supported me long enough."

Horse and cart with driver was costing seven pence. It was money well spent, leading, as it would, to the collection of a further three pounds when they reached Tom Walsingham's estate. Falconer lay on a pile of empty hopsacks in the back of the cart, folio pages rolled and clutched in his hand. He had begun the journey seated beside the driver, a Ludgate acquaintance named Grief. But now that they were in the countryside, he was stretched flat on the sacks, trying to control fits of coughing triggered by the cart wheels bouncing along a rutted lane. Sunlight poured through leafy branches overhead; Falconer shielded his eyes with the back of one hand.

"He was a funny old man," the driver stated between whistles and clucks to the plodding horse.

"Who?"

"Sir Thomas More."

Falconer regretted now having told Grief the subject of Marlowe's script. "How so?"

"What he said to Sir Edmund Walsingham. The grandfather of the bloke I'm taking you to visit at Scadbury. Sir Edmund was Lieutenant of the Tower of London. So he was in charge of all the executions."

"Lovely." Falconer craved sleep.

"And when Sir Thomas More started up the stairs to have his head cut off, he said to Walsingham, 'I pray you, Master Lieutenant, see me safe up. As for my coming down, let me shift for myself.' "

The clopping of the horse's hoofs emphasized Falconer's lack of response. So the driver repeated, "Funny old man."

An hour later, Grief wakened his passenger by reaching back, clutching his hair, and giving his head a shake. "We're here," he announced as Falconer got onto hands and knees and stared at the moat, the gateway, and the massive Tudor beams. "I thought you were dead."

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A servant came running with a pikestaff held at the port. "Who goes there? Where are you from? Who do you want to see?"

"I'm delivering some manuscript to Christopher Marlowe. He gave it me day before yesterday in London."

"Keep back!" The servant made a threatening gesture with the pike. "He's not here. They both went up to Deptford, to Mrs. Bull's Inn. Marlowe and my master Walsingham."

The driver gave his passenger a laconic stare. "What now?"

"We've no choice. We go to Deptford."

"It'll cost you more."

"It's only seven miles," Falconer protested. "And it's on our way back to London."

"You can pay me another three pence," the driver said. "Or you can get out and walk."

"Drive on," the noverint said. He began searching for three pennies in his cowhide purse.

Within an hour, they were breathing tangy air from the great tidal river. Rolling into Deptford, the driver said, "Those masts at the end of the street, they belong to The Golden Hind. I was here in '81 when the Queen gave Drake his knighthood."

"Where is Mrs. Bull's Inn?"

"Don't get excited, it's just ahead. See the sign? Have I ever delivered you wrong?" As Falconer climbed down, Grief told him, "The Hind is now a floating tavern. I'll be there for a couple of hours if you should need me."

The inn seemed deserted. But it was not closed; the door creaked as Falconer went inside, bending to clear a low ceiling. It was like coming aboard a ship. Contrasted with the late-afternoon sunlight, it was dark between the papered walls where pewter tankards hung, glowing dully, above a close-packed flotilla of oak tables.

"Who's out there?" It was Marlowe's voice calling from an inner room.

"It's me, Kit. Peter Falconer."

A door swung open, spilling lantern light from a room clouded with tobacco smoke. Marlowe, in shirt sleeves, filled the doorway. "What are you doing here?"

"I brought the pages." When the poet blinked at him, he added, "The assignment you gave me."

"Yes, of course. Come in, young Peter. You look at death's door. Why did you make the journey?"

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"I wanted you to have my copy." Falconer proffered the scroll. He knew there would be no need to mention the additional money to Kit Marlowe.

The poet drew the pages open and held them to the light. "Splendid," he said. "Your usual elegant work. My poor sentences look quite worthy, being so professionally inscribed."

There were four men besides Marlowe in the room, seated around a table cluttered with tankards, plates, and bowls. Falconer saw the remnants of a feast, but he felt no hunger. He recognized Walsingham. The other three were strangers.

"Tom, you know," Marlowe said, introducing his noverint. "Meet Robert Poley, Ingram Frizer, and Nicholas Skeres." They nodded, but none of them seemed happy to have his name announced to this intruder.

Walsingham was impatient. "May I remind you, Christopher, we have little time."

"Always time to verify the welfare of a friend." Marlowe looked closely into Falconer's eyes. "Tell the truth, young Peter. You're on your last legs."

Falconer was ready to drop. He coughed and could not stop until he was given a drink. There was no strength in him. He leaned on Marlowe's arm. The man called Poley murmured, "Must he bring his pox in here?"

"I want you to rest before you go another step," Marlowe said. He led Falconer back to a couch against a wall in the darkened room. Peter fell onto it like a bundle of dried sticks. His eyes closed and he sighed deeply. "When it's time to go," the poet whispered, "I'll make arrangements for your transport." Then he went back into the smoky room, leaving the door ajar.

"Can we settle this?" Poley said. Drifting on the rim of sleep, Falconer heard their conversation in fragments. What they were saying amazed him. "Let's have done and get out of here."

"Why can't I just go on living?" Marlowe said. "I've done good work as a government agent. I spied on the Catholic exiles in Rheims, those who would return and bring down Her Majesty. I'm friends with Raleigh."

"You're a wise poet," Walsingham said, "but a political fool. You drink and then you babble. You can't restrain your tongue. You're not the only atheist among us, but you've flaunted it too often in public."

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"Quod me nutrit, me destruit," the poet said. Falconer had seen the Latin inscription on a portrait of Marlowe years ago on a visit to Cambridge, in happier times. He knew it meant, "That which nourishes me destroys me." Was he referring to the poetic muse which ruled his tongue? Or to alcohol?

"As for Raleigh," Walsingham went on, "he wants you 'dead' as much as any of us. When the Star Chamber summons you back for further questioning, and it will, they'll proceed to torture. They'll ask you about Raleigh's little academy of free thinkers. You'll name names, including his and mine."

"I'd never expose my friends."

"You would. They'll stretch you on the rack. They'll burn you. And you're no religious fanatic like old Francis Kett."

"I'd forgotten Kett," Marlowe mused. "I knew him only vaguely at Corpus Christi. They say he went in sackcloth, leaping and dancing into the fire. Twenty times all together, clapping his hands."

"But Marlowe will not appear before the Chamber again because Marlowe is going to be killed right now, in self-defense, by our good friend Frizer. In an argument over the payment for Mrs. Bull's meat and wine."

Falconer heard Marlowe's sarcastic laugh. "Will posterity believe such a flimsy motive?"

"They'll believe it," Walsingham said, "because these three will swear to it. Now I must go. I was never here."

"Wait," Poley said. "We haven't found our substitute. The man to be killed in Marlowe's place."

"It was decided. You'll choose some drunken sailor from the Deptford waterfront. It's gone dark, you can do it easily. Get on with it."

Marlowe's voice overrode the others. He sounded stubborn, as if a problem had given him pause for some time and was still unresolved. "Wait. You speak as if the life of this unknown sailor is without value. Why should he die so that I may live?"

"Because," Walsingham hissed as if he were addressing a child, "you and not this anonymous man are about to be tortured, giving away the names of certain important people, myself included. After which, we too may be summoned to the Tower. And who knows what chaos might overwhelm England in the wake of such wholesale executions?"

"I believe," Marlowe said, "that England soon will enter into civil war, whatever you may do this day."

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Poley interrupted, "Are we to debate this subject until daylight returns? It goes on and on, like one of your damned plays."

As Marlowe laughed out loud, Walsingham said, "And there's the bigger reason. You must leave this country tonight and never return. You must sail for safety in France or Italy. Christopher Marlowe has many more plays to write. Though they appear under another name."

"The victim," Poley said. "Let's go out and find our sailor."

Peter Falconer's heart was pounding. He was experiencing a sensation of inner sweetness. It was akin to the euphoria he had once felt late in the morning when, parched with thirst, he had poured down a foaming pint of brown October ale without drawing a breath. He lifted himself from the couch and went to the light. He staggered as he entered the room, catching the doorframe and leaning there.

"I could not help overhearing what was said," he whispered. He cleared his throat and said it again. Then, "You can see how it is with me. I have the plague. I won't last another week. Let your anonymous sailor live. Take me."

Marlowe said, "Don't be ridiculous, Peter."

"Listen to him," Poley snapped.

"It would be an honor to die in your place, Kit. I've been your noverint. Let me be your angel."

"I could never permit it."

"I'm an orphan. I've never known really who I am." Too weak to stand, Falconer settled onto a chair. "This act would identify me. Forever."

"He is the right size. Kit's clothes will fit him." Walsingham glanced from one to the other of the three conspirators. They nodded agreement. "Come with me, Kit," he said. "Your passage is arranged, you sail on the tide." He turned to Poley. "You remember the plan? Frizer is to have wounds, as if there was a fight."

Marlowe turned in the doorway. "You know not who you are, young Peter?" he said quietly. "I can tell you. You are as noble a man as was ever born. What can I do for you?"

"There is a woman in Ludgate Lane, her name is Betty Allingham. She works at the Golden Fleece. I was going to give her the balance of the fee you meant to pay me."

"She shall have three pounds," Marlowe said, "and a goodly sum beyond that."

The murder was done quickly. Bleeding from self-inflicted wounds on his arms, Ingram Frizer drove his knife deeply into Falconer's

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head above the right eye. The coroner, who had been paid in advance, falsified the required document. At the inquest, all three men described the drunken fight over money with Poley and Skeres doing their best to hold off Marlowe before Frizer, desperately, drove home the fatal thrust.

Two days later, there was a hurried burial in the yard of St. Nicholas Church in Deptford, by the north wall of the tower. In the years that followed, Marlowe was vilified by members of the establishment who resented his brilliance and feared his determination to describe people and attitudes as he saw them.

As for Peter Falconer, a brief reference to his existence was recorded in the manuscript of time. But the quill that inscribed his name was selected, as in only the rarest cases, from an angel's wing.

DETECTIVERSE

ANOTHER GRAVE TONE

by JAMES HOLDING

Hic iacet murderer Carlton Kemper,
Who killed a hooker in a temper.
In court, he pleaded for his life:
"It wasn't," he said, "like killing my wife.
This was just a current affair."
The judge said, "So's the electric chair."

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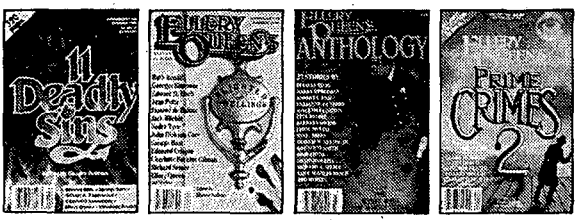

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We first published Richard Ciciarelli in July of 1980. We welcome him back with something different—a story that follows not a person, but a thing: that object of universal fantasy, the winning lottery ticket . . .

WINNING NUMBERS

by RICHARD CICIARELLI

Lanny Swensen looked from the newspaper article to the ticket in his hand and back to the newspaper. His eyes widened in disbelief and his jaw dropped.

Once more he compared the numbers.

Six, eighteen, twenty-five, thirty-seven, forty-four, fifty-two. They match! They match! I've got the winning ticket!

One last time Swensen read the headlines:

ONE WINNER IN $25 MILLION STATE LOTTERY—PRIZE YET TO BE CLAIMED

This is unbelievable, Swensen thought as he shook with excitement. *And it couldn't have happened at a better time.*

There hadn't been much call for a stonemason recently, so Lanny Swensen had found himself sitting at home, watching the afternoon soap operas and living off his unemployment checks. Which, by the way, were due to run out very soon.

"Goodbye unemployment. Goodbye bills. Goodbye two-room apartment," Swensen sang as he pirouetted across his living room floor toward the telephone. "Got to call Lars and tell him the news."

Swensen dialed his brother's number and listened as the phone rang and rang and rang.

Probably out back playing gardener, Swensen thought as he hung up. *I'll have to drive over to his house.*

Swensen backed his ten-year-old car onto the street and headed across town.

In his mind he could see his brand-new mansion. He could see his new limousine. He could see himself surrounded by fawning women.

He could see everything except the red light.

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Swensen crossed into the intersection at the same time a tractor-trailor did. The noise of the collision was deafening as the huge semi plowed into the driver's side of Swensen's car, folding it in on itself and pushing it a hundred or more feet down the road.

John DeVoto stepped out of Mae's Diner patting his stomach. Today's lunch was a lot better than usual. It would be a tough job to push a broom after all that meat loaf, mashed potatoes, and apple pie.

A screeching of brakes and the sound of metal slamming into metal caused DeVoto to jump and pivot in his tracks.

Oh my God, he thought as he broke into what for him was a run.

DeVoto arrived at the wreck that used to be a car and scrambled around to the passenger's side. Summoning up all his courage, he poked his head into the hole where the window used to be to see if the driver was still alive.

One glance was enough to tell him it was much too late to help this poor man.

"How is he?" someone called as a crowd gathered around the accident site.

"I'm afraid he's dead," DeVoto answered, and he turned his eyes away from Lanny Swensen's remains.

That's when he noticed it tucked into the crack where the passenger seat and its backrest meet. It was a lottery ticket.

Poor slob won't need this any more, DeVoto thought, and he reached into the car, removed the ticket, and furtively slipped it into his own pocket.

As he did, he could hear his boss's voice echoing in his mind. "DeVoto, where are those cleaning rags? You take them? DeVoto, we're missing a set of screwdrivers. You see them anyplace? DeVoto, what happened to that box of trash bags we just got in?"

That's why he jumped when the policeman touched him on the shoulder.

"Easy, fella," the cop said. "I know it's pretty gruesome. Did you see it happen?"

"Huh? Oh, no. I just came out of the diner over there," DeVoto pointed, "and I heard a crash. When I turned around, I saw this car here being pushed down the road by that semi. I got some CPR training, so I came over to see if I could help out, but the guy there was already dead."

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After another half hour of questioning, DeVoto was allowed to return to work, where he explained to his boss why he was so late. He retold the story several times to his co-workers during the afternoon, always leaving out the part about finding the lottery ticket.

As soon as he punched out, DeVoto hopped into his car and drove to a supermarket where each week's winning lottery numbers were posted.

His head bobbed up and down as he looked from his ticket to the posted numbers and back again.

As he read the final number, DeVoto felt his knees weaken. His legs and arms shook and his face broke out in a sweat.

As quickly as he could, he stuffed the winning ticket back into his pocket and walked out of the supermarket.

I won. I won, DeVoto told himself forty or fifty times on his way home. He had conveniently forgotten that the ticket belonged to the dead man who was in that morning's accident.

DeVoto parked his car in the apartment house lot and entered the building. He was still so dazed at his good fortune that he didn't notice the man who had pulled up alongside him and followed him into the building.

The same man entered the elevator with DeVoto, stood behind him, and when the elevator doors closed, quickly wrapped a length of electrical wire around DeVoto's neck and pulled it tight.

As Art Reynolds released his hold on the wire, his victim slumped to the floor of the elevator. Reynolds quickly searched the dead man's pockets until he found what he was looking for—the lottery ticket.

"You'd make a lousy poker player," he told John DeVoto's limp body. "I seen you matching numbers at the grocery store, and I knew you had a winner here. Now, just how many numbers do you have right?"

Reynolds looked at the ticket and matched the printed numbers with the ones he had memorized from the store's poster.

"Holy smoke!" he gasped. "I got the big one."

Reynolds left the elevator at John DeVoto's floor, took the stairs back to the lobby, and exited the building, certain he hadn't been seen.

As he pulled into the driveway near the ramshackle hovel he called home, he grinned. He kicked the car door shut, swearing at

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the oil burner he was forced to drive, and walked across a seedy lawn to a set of broken steps.

The pale, thin girl who was sipping coffee from a chipped mug jumped when Reynolds slammed the kitchen door open and stamped into the house.

"Take a good look, Liz," he said scornfully as he held up the ticket, " 'cause I'm outta here. This little piece of paper is taking me to bigger and better places."

"What about me?" Liz Felton asked. "What about the baby?"

"Don't make me laugh," Reynolds sneered. "You're okay for some poor, penniless slob, but you ain't suited for the high life."

"I'm more suited than a high-school dropout who hasn't done better than a welfare check every month for the last six years."

"Yeah? Well if it wasn't for my welfare checks, you wouldn't've had nothin' to eat at all. At least I put a roof over your head."

"A leaky roof!" Liz slammed her coffee mug on the table and rose abruptly, gouging four marks in the floor with the chair legs. "You got money, you gotta take me with you. For the baby's sake."

"Here's somethin' for the baby's sake," Reynolds yelled as he brought the back of his hand up fast and hard, slapping Liz across the face and sending her sprawling into a counter.

"It's your baby," Liz screamed. "You can't just abandon her."

"It's *your* baby," Reynolds argued. "For all I know, I ain't even the father. You could've been pregnant when you moved in here. Now get out of my way. I gotta pack and get out of this dump."

Liz Felton reached a hand into a counter drawer and wrapped her fingers around a knife handle. As Reynolds brushed by her, she lifted the knife high above her head and plunged the blade into his back.

Her rage was so intense she lost track of how many times she struck her live-in boyfriend, but there was little doubt that he was dead.

Liz picked up the lottery ticket Reynolds had dropped and sat back down, her head spinning. It took a few minutes before she made a decision.

Putting the ticket into her pocket, she grabbed Reynolds by the feet and dragged him across the kitchen floor, out the door, and down the steps to the yard.

It was fairly dark and there weren't many neighbors, so she felt sure she wouldn't be seen as she tugged and pulled Reynolds's limp body across the lawn toward the old abandoned well.

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She removed the heavy metal lid that covered the well, maneuvered Reynolds's body into position, and dropped him headfirst down the shaft. She covered her ears as soon as she released him so she wouldn't hear the body hit bottom.

After replacing the lid, Liz went back into the house and to bed. She slept unusually soundly that night.

Police Sergeant William Bowles looked up from his work to see a young girl standing before his desk.

She would have been pretty with a good washing and a little make-up. Her clothes were a little shabby, too. And the poor kid was holding a baby wrapped in a stained blanket.

"Could you help me?" she asked. "I bought this the other day. I probably shouldn't have; I really can't afford it. Anyhow, I don't understand these lottery games too good. Did I win anything?"

She held a lottery ticket out to Bowles, who took it from her bony hand and glanced at it. Then he turned a page in his newspaper and compared numbers.

"Well, miss," Bowles said, "I got some good news and some bad news."

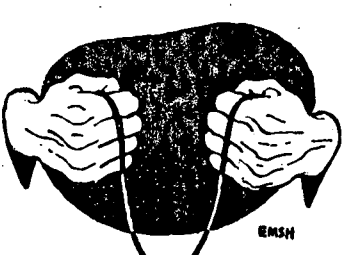
A look of confusion crossed the girl's face.

"You got all the right numbers," the sergeant explained, "but the wrong date."

"Wrong date?"

"Yes. See right here in the smaller print? Each of these tickets is stamped with the date of the drawing it's good for. This ticket was for last Saturday's lottery. The lottery with these numbers as winners was Wednesday's. This ticket is worthless."

The sergeant had to move fast to catch the girl and baby as the frail young lady fainted.



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a *NEW* short story by

JON L. BREEN

This month EQMM *book reviewer Jon L. Breen dons one of his other hats—mystery writer par excellence. Mr. Breen's first story for* EQMM *appeared in 1967, and since then he has continued to distinguish himself in the mystery field, garnering a nomination from the British Crime Writers Association for the Dagger awards and developing several popular mystery series. In the following story, one of Mr. Breen's most likable sleuths, retired major-league umpire Ed Gorgon, comes back in a four-star outing . . .*

THROW OUT THE FIRST AX

by JON L. BREEN

Retirement is tough.

I was a major-league umpire for almost forty years. Then one early October night, last day of the season, a Chicago runner comes barreling down the third-base line toward home in the bottom of the ninth, trying to score the tying run that would extend his season and my career by at least a few more pitches. The New York catcher stands there to block the plate as he receives the relay throw from the shortstop. The runner starts his slide, raising dust. He collides with the catcher, who manages to hold onto the ball and make the tag. I raise my fist in the Out sign one last time, and that's that. Ed Gorgon is no longer a major-league ump. Ed Gorgon has joined the great ranks of the retired. AARP here I come.

My health is fine, and so is my eye. I could go on calling 'em like I see 'em indefinitely. One more season anyway. For more than forty

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years, counting the years in the minors, umpiring has been the center of my life. No wife, no kids, precious few other personal entanglements. Home so seldom between March and October, I'm not all that sure where home is.

I'll take that back. Home is the diamond. Home is every diamond in the major-leagues—between World Series and All-Star games and the regular league schedule, I've done my umping at just about every single one of them.

Relax. That's all the self-pity you'll hear from me. As it happens, a recently-retired umpire, especially one who got to be fairly well-known as the years went by, does get some interesting offers. Some lucrative, some not, but it doesn't matter that much. I won't try to tell you major-league umpires are well-paid for people at the top of their profession—the guys we call safe and out could buy and sell us twenty times over—but I managed to save quite a bit over the years, and I've never been a big spender, so I retire well-off by my undemanding standards. Money is the least of my worries.

That will explain why a pleasant June afternoon, my first June away from baseball, finds me serving as the honorary judge at a much less highly publicized but in its way just as entertaining sports event: the annual Clydewood Timber Games. Some off-seasons I've spent time in Clydewood, a small town in California's San Jacinto Mountains, and I'm pretty well-known up there. I've heard about the Timber Games, but this is my first chance to attend, and I suspect the duties of the honorary judge will not be too onerous. I'm right in that. The honorary judge is really a glorified spectator who gets the best seat in the house, while the timekeeping and scorekeeping is done by members of the local sponsoring service club (the Loyal Order of Sidewinders, not nationally affiliated as far as I know) and their wives.

The Clydewood Timber Games are held in a large clearing in the county park, stands of pine trees on all sides. There are two sets of bleachers, one covered and one not, depending on your relationship with the sun, both with a good view of the field where the competition will take place. The competitive area is covered with an assortment of logs and stumps and targets, highlighted by a scarily high pole with a bell at the top. Beyond the field and the officials' stand, where the honorary judge is accorded a seat, are a bunch more targets used for practice throughout the competition. Patrolling as security are a cadre of potbellied guys in nineteenth-century U.S. Cavalry uniforms. Behind the stands are various concessions, in-

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cluding food, art, and local crafts. Most popular is the U.S. Forest Service booth where folks can get a free baby white-pine or sequoia tree to plant and kids can saw their own section of log and get the Forest Service insignia burned in it, also free of charge. Smokey Bear and Woodsy Owl are wandering around pressing the flesh, and I, for one, don't envy the folks inside those hot suits.

A nice family-type event, you can see, and I'm looking forward to a good time. The honorary judge's biggest duty comes at the very beginning of the festivities and involves those targets I mentioned. I'm introduced by the emcee, Gene Bellows, a local hardware dealer with pronounced ham-like leanings, say a very few passably well-chosen words over the public address, and then am invited to throw out the first ax.

Ax-throwing is one of the standard events at a lumberjack competition like the Clydewood Timber Games. You take the thing in one or two hands, cock it back over your shoulder, and throw it overhand at a big archery target. They've stuck a soft-drink can in the bullseye, so if you hit it squarely, the can bursts and the drink squirts all over the place to the delight of the crowd. (You can't take long to celebrate because you're soon busy wiping that sticky stuff off your ax—and some of these competitors regard their axes as members of the family.)

I've never thrown an ax before today, but I took some instructions on one of the practice targets this morning in order that my effort not be totally disgraceful. The young woman who is serving as my mentor, Annie Valmont, a Forest Service employee who's entered in all the women's events, gives me a thumbs-up signal as I approach the throwing line. I remember the first thing she told me this morning: be careful you don't catch the back of your head with the ax as you swing it over. That, she warns, could be very messy. Yes, I can imagine.

My throw hits one of the outer rings of the target, one point if I were in the competition. Well, at least I hit the target, but I'm a little disappointed. In practice I did better.

A second chance comes my way. Sterling Pillwiler, the reporter-photographer for the local weekly paper the *Clydewood Part-Timer* (slogan: "Part of the news some of the time") wants another picture. Could I do a second throw? Glad to oblige.

Should have quit while I was ahead. I finesse it too much. It's right on line but too gently thrown and doesn't stick, just falls limply

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in the dirt in front of the target, a blow to the old ump's macho pride.

"Let's have a big hand for our honorary judge, Ed Gorgon!" roars Gene Bellows, and I lift my hands over my head like a politician or prize fighter, go back to my seat to watch the real competitors do it. I really want another throw, though. People are always wanting me to quit too early.

The regular competition starts with the men's and women's ax-throws, which go on simultaneously at targets at opposite sides of the field. They're qualifying today for the final round tomorrow. Some of the competitors are neophytes and do almost as badly as the honorary judge, but most of them are obviously experts, and it isn't long before the first drink can gets split.

I pay more attention to the women's competition. Not just because the young women in their shorts and jeans are more fun to look at than the men but because I have a rooting interest. I want to see my coach, Annie Valmont, do well. She doesn't break any cans and most of her tosses see her shaking her head, but she still does well enough to qualify for the final. So, but narrowly, does last year's overall women's winner, Cindy Williamson, a pretty lady with a big rooting section and a slightly artificial homecoming-queen manner. She's even unhappier with her throws than Annie. Surprise of the women's competition is Mary Delgado, the only competitor who throws the ax underhand. Its flight through the air is not as dramatic; in fact, its approach to the target is downright wimpy. But it's effective, getting her a couple of fours and a five, the latter as close as you could get to that drink can without getting your ax sticky. Mary reacts to each good throw with joyous astonishment, but I sense she must know what she's doing. Beginner's luck only holds for so long.

When it's over, I hear Cindy Williamson muttering to some of her friends, "She's so terrific, huh? Just wait till tomorrow." My pal Annie gives me a rueful look. She may be thinking the same thing, but she's too polite to say it.

The other events go on, the most exciting the Choker Set, which involves an obstacle race over a series of logs while dragging a cable behind you (or holding it out in front of you—styles differ). The winner has to throw the cable around a final log, pull the choker tight, and then go back and touch the previous log. It soon develops getting the choker attached is the hardest part, and many a hare who sails over the obstacles gets beat by a surer-handed tortoise at

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the finish. They are essentially racing time, but they go two at once to give it a feel of head-to-head competition. In the women's draw, Annie and Cindy are matched, and my gal noses the champ out. Cindy's finding defending her title may not be all that easy.

In general, the Timber Games are a model of old-time sportsmanship. Prize money is small, and the competitors are mostly there for the love of the sport, not necessarily what I've experienced in baseball the last few years. But there are a couple of hotheads in every crowd, and an event called the Log Biscuit Split produces a Timber Games rhubarb.

In the biscuit split, you have to chop a round section from a tree-trunk into five pieces in the shortest time you can. Since no two pieces of wood are exactly alike, you draw for your piece, so luck can have a real bearing on the outcome. If you've ever done any sawing or chopping, you know the presence of knots is going to slow you down considerably, and there's nothing like a knot to ruin a timber competition. Only thing worse that can happen is a piece of metal (a bullet, say) buried unseen in the wood.

Well, it seems that Tony Williamson, who runs a local tree-cutting service and is the husband of Queen Cindy, got a bad draw in the biscuit split and thinks that Carlos Delgado, who runs a Mexican restaurant and is the husband of the under-handed Mary, somehow rigged the draw to put him at a disadvantage. I never do quite figure out how he thinks Carlos did that, and the people running the competition for the Loyal Order of Sidewinders are aghast at the accusation. With a lot of yelling and cajoling and conciliatory mike-work by booster Gene Bellows, they manage to get calmed down without actually coming to blows, and the games go on. It's pretty clear to me there's bad blood between these guys that has nothing to do with biscuit-splitting.

As the afternoon goes on, the rivalries continue. Tony and Cindy win handily in the Jack and Jill cross-cut saw competition. Carlos and Mary also team up and finish nowhere—underhand ax-throwing seems to be Mary's only lumbering aptitude, and Carlos throws her a withering glare. (I don't think a husband and wife combo in these events is such a good idea. Annie, whose artist husband Gaston is home in his studio, takes second in the qualifying with a bearded forester who could pass for Paul Bunyan.)

I'm finding all this pretty exciting, but the Sidewinder auxiliary members on either side of me on the officials' stand assure me tomorrow's finals will bring the real thrills. Some of the better competitors

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are under wraps today, doing just enough to qualify and saving their best moves for the final.

Not Tony and Carlos, though. In the climactic pole climb, they both go all out, clambering up the smooth vertical log to vertigo-making heights, aided by a rope and spikes in the shoes. You have to ring a bell at the top before you come down. Going up, they're equally adept, but on the trip down, Carlos has the edge, making it efficiently without a scratch, while Tony gives his face an ugly scrape doing the last ten feet or so in free fall and still finishing a couple of seconds slower than Carlos. They shake hands for Sterling Pillwiler's camera, but there's not a lot of warmth in it.

When the day's over, I ask Gene Bellows if I get another chance tomorrow to throw out the first ax. He assures me that is a part of my duties each day, that the fans would be disappointed not to see the famous honorary judge do his stuff, and I tell him I'm gonna get the heart of the soda can this time. With the finals scheduled to start at ten A.M., I'll get out at eight to get in some practice with the competitors.

When I tell Annie, she grins and says, "Hey, Ed, next year you'll want to enter this thing for real."

"Yeah, right. I'll have to work on my pole climb, too."

"I don't know if I'd recommend that," she says with a straight face, only half kidding in case I'm more than half serious. Of course, I'm not a sixty-fourth serious.

Anyhow, that explains why I'm the one to find the body the next morning. I don't see any cars in the parking lot and when I get to the practice targets, carrying my borrowed ax in its protective cover, I figure I'm the first person there, but then I see a silent figure lying in the grass about competitive distance from one of the targets. From the front, Mary Delgado looks like she could be asleep, but the pool of blood on the ground under her head and the bloody ax behind her scotches that faint hope. I try to find a pulse or a heartbeat, but it's clear to me she's beyond help. When Annie arrives to give me my lesson, I wave her away, tell her to call the authorities, and I spend the next twenty minutes playing cop, keeping the arriving competitors away from the body until the authorities arrive.

Gene Bellows is one of the first arrivals, and to start with he seems to want to use his official position with the Timber Games as an excuse to tramp around amidst the evidence. I make him see reason quickly. By the time Annie gets back, looking shaken and a little sick, Tony and Cindy Williamson have arrived along with

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a few of the other competitors, and they start to fill the air with speculations.

"What an awful accident to have happen," Gene moans, apparently not thinking about more sinister explanations at all yet. "How could she have done it to herself?"

"She must have caught the back of her head with the ax," Annie declares. "Isn't that just what I warned you about, Ed? There's always that danger."

Gene points out the obvious objection. "Mary always threw the ax underhand. You can't take off the back of your head throwing underhand."

Annie, who hasn't looked too good up to now, looks just that little bit sicker. She responds weakly, "Maybe she was trying something new."

Cindy Williamson, one tough lady, isn't taking it near as hard as Annie. She says, "No, she'd never do that, especially after doing so well in the qualifying yesterday throwing underhand. She was terrified of the ax. That's why she threw it the way she did. She was murdered."

Her husband looks at her uncomfortably. "Aw, honey, it has to be an accident. Who'd want to kill Mary?"

That's just what the honorary judge wants to know.

"Did she usually practice by herself?" I ask the group at large.

"Always," Cindy says. "I think she was self-conscious about her unusual form with the ax."

Annie agrees. "She always practiced alone as far as I know. I'm surprised she was able to do so well in competition, she was so shy about it."

Gene huddles with some of his brother Sidewinders, and they arrive at the inevitable decision to call off the second day of the Timber Games. Everybody there seems to agree it's the only way to go, but for a second, I get the impression Cindy is going to give him an argument. She's the one arguing for murder—and rightly, I think—but she still seems to think the show must go on. When she sees she's out of step with the others, she bites her tongue. I don't think the looks her husband's flashing at her are having any effect.

By the time the sheriff's deputies arrive to start the official investigation, I've had to deal with Sterling Pillwiler, who is admittedly not as aggressive as a big-city journalist would be but still thinks the press deserves to get closer to the body than I think appropriate. I've also managed to talk one of the hired security men in their "F-

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Troop" outfits out of taking charge and instituting a search for clues before the arrival of real law enforcement.

I'm thankful Deputy Forbes arrives on the scene before Carlos Delgado does. The deputy is just getting things organized, marking off the crime scene for the later arrival of the technical crews and identifying who should stick around and who could just give him a name and address and go on home, when the bereaved Delgado arrives. He's obviously gotten the word from somebody of what's happened, but his first impulse is not to run to the body of his fallen wife but to fly at Tony Williamson with blood in his eye.

"You killed her!" he shouts, and before any of us can get between them, he aims a well-placed shot to Tony's face and manages to reopen the cut Tony received on yesterday's pole-climb descent.

With Gene Bellows restraining Tony, and me holding onto Carlos in a bear hug, both combatants manage to expound at greater length.

"We were happy till you came along!" Carlos sobs. "I'll kill you for what you did to her."

Cindy Williamson, who remains unnaturally cool through all this, shoots her husband a sidelong glance but doesn't say anything.

In a shaken voice, Tony says, "I didn't kill anybody. It's the husband you always look to first, isn't it, Deputy? Isn't it the husband who kills the wife nine times out of ten?"

"I loved her!" Carlos shoots back. "You didn't love her. You just used her."

Tony shakes his head and tries to look away. "Let loose of me, Gene. I'm not going after him. I feel sorry for him."

Gene relaxes his hold, and Tony turns away, his hand to his wounded cheek. His wife goes over to him, puts her arm on his back, but the gesture seems perfunctory.

As the confused morning goes on, I manage to pick up some more information about these two couples.

"Sure, Tony and Mary had an affair," Gene Bellows tells me, sipping a soft drink that might have been part of the ax-throw target if this day had gone as planned. "Carlos found out about it. There are different stories as to just *how* he found out. I've heard he actually found them in bed together, but I doubt if it was that dramatic."

"The whole town of Clydewood knows this?"

Gene shrugs. "It's a small-town thing. Everybody knows something about it, but we tend to know different things, and even what we know may not be true. I think what happened was they did it,

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they were sorry, and both couples patched it up. If they hadn't all entered the Timber Games, maybe all this hostility could have been put aside forever. But in the competition, the wounds sort of got reopened."

"Tony's sure did. So you think one of them killed Mary? Here you've got Carlos accusing Tony of doing it, but you'd think it would be Carlos himself or maybe Cindy who'd have more of a motive than Tony would. Why would Tony want to kill Mary—and why would Carlos think he did?"

Gene considers. "I see what you mean. Maybe he didn't mean Tony literally killed Mary, that is, swung the ax. Maybe he thought Tony created the climate that got Mary killed." He pauses a second, and a look of inspiration comes over his face. "Maybe Carlos did it himself, then blamed Tony for driving him to it, huh? That seems psychologically sound to me. My wife's a psychologist," he adds, as if establishing his credentials to make the diagnosis.

"Could anybody else you can think of have had a motive?" I ask.

Gene looks uncomfortable. I'm an outsider prying into Clydewood affairs, but no more so than Deputy Forbes—Clydewood doesn't have any live-in law enforcement—and this is murder, after all. Finally, he says, "I don't really think so, Ed. I don't think it could be one of the other female entrants trying to eliminate the competition, do you? I mean, this isn't exactly the Olympics, is it?"

Another question occurs to me. "I know Cindy is defending women's champ. Did the other three compete last year, too?"

"Tony did. He took second in the men's division. But Carlos and Mary didn't. I had no idea either of them had any interest in this kind of thing till their names turned up in the entries."

"Are they any good?"

"Well, you saw Mary's weird ax-throw, but she doesn't do anything else well. Carlos's best is the pole climb, but he did well in several of the other events, too. He runs a restaurant, but I think he must have had a background in lumberjacking events before he came here."

"How long have Carlos and Mary lived in Clydewood?"

"Less than a year, now you mention it, so I guess they weren't even in town for last year's Timber Games. They've sure gotten to know a lot of people in the community in that time." He draws reflectively on his drink, and I think there may be more to that last statement than meets the ear.

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Leaving Gene to his soda, I buttonhole Sterling Pillwiler, who's been shooting pictures and taking notes industriously since his arrival. Working for a weekly paper, he's obviously not under any immediate deadline pressure, so he's able to take his time on the story of a lifetime. Probably he sees a chance to play stringer and sell some pictures and stories to the wire service or even TV. Knowing how many minor-league pitchers dream of the Cy Young Award, I wouldn't doubt Sterling sees a Pulitzer Prize in his future.

So I'm not surprised that, being a reporter, he wants to interrogate me before I can interrogate him.

"Mr. Gorgon, isn't it true you solved some murders during your umpiring career?"

"I sometimes helped out the official police, sort of as a technical advisor. But I think the credit for solving the crimes belongs to them."

"Do you have any ideas about the death of Mary Delgado?"

"If I get any, I'll relay them to Deputy Forbes," I say, having got well-practiced in stonewalling during my umpiring days. Then I realize if I don't give him some kind of copy he won't feel inclined to tell *me* anything. I strain for a quotable quote. "I've certainly enjoyed everybody's hospitality, and I think the Clydewood Timber Games is a fine event. It's surely tragic that it should end like this, and I feel very sorry for the young woman's husband and family." Nothing much, you'll agree, but Pillwiler scribbles away.

"Speaking as an expert, Mr. Gorgon, do you believe this was murder?"

"I'm no expert, and I'd sure *rather* think it was a tragic accident. Do *you* think it was murder?"

"Do I?" Sterling looks surprised to have the questioning turned back on him.

"You know the people better than I do. I'm just an occasional visitor to Clydewood. I'll bet you know things about these people you couldn't print in your paper."

Sterling looks nervous and moves toward the edge of the trees, a little farther away from the nearest people. "This is off the record," he murmurs. Interesting he should say that, like *I'm* going to write this up for publication. "A whole slew of people hated Mary. She seemed like such a sweet innocent lady, but she specialized in sleeping with married men. Just so they weren't married to her."

"You mean Tony Williamson . . . ?"

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"That's the one that backfired on her, because that's the one Carlos found out about. But there were plenty of others." Sterling casts his eyes around the field, as if looking for an example. He gestures subtly toward the emcee still with the soft drink in his hand. "She got it on with Gene Bellows for one."

"No foolin'?" If so, Gene's last remark takes on a whole new meaning.

"Oh, sure. And Gaston Valmont, the painter."

"Annie's husband?"

"Right. In my job, you get to find out these things. And there are a dozen more I could mention. A woman like that can do a lot of damage in a little town like this, Mr. Gorgon. I wish I *could* expose her whole story in the paper, but I'd like to keep this job."

"Are you a married man, Sterling?"

He turns a little red. "Uh, yeah."

"Mary Delgado ever come on to you?"

He looks at the ground. "Not everybody takes their marriage vows so lightly. Excuse me, will you? I have to get some more pictures."

More and more of the sheriff's men are appearing in the park. This is a major homicide investigation. Deputy Forbes introduces me to a plainclothes character I suspect might be the sheriff himself, but it turns out he's just the county's top murder specialist, Bill Ragsdale. Forbes has been friendly enough, but Ragsdale's just that little bit hostile.

"Forbes tells me you're doing your own investigation here, Mr. Gorgon," he says sarcastically. "Maybe you'd like to fill us in on your deductions."

"Sorry," I say, "can't offer a one. I'm not doing my own investigation, but you can't expect people to stand around all morning and not talk, can you? One thing's been puzzling me, and I'm sure your folks have looked into it. How did Mary Delgado get here this morning?"

Ragsdale looks at Forbes. Don't tell me they haven't thought of it.

Forbes says, "Uh, we haven't ascertained that as yet," and looks a little sheepish.

"There was no car in the parking lot when I got here. So she didn't drive herself. Did she live within walking distance of the park?"

Forbes consults some notes. "Naw, their address must be fifteen miles from here."

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"Someone drove her here this morning then. You might want to check with the people who live near the park entrance about whether they saw any cars enter the park or leave it before eight o'clock this morning. And her husband might know how she got here."

"You telling us our business, Gorgon?" Ragsdale says. He turns to Forbes. "I'm sure we're working on that angle already, aren't we, Deputy?"

Forbes nods agreement and scurries off to "check on the results."

When Forbes has gone, I pass along to Ragsdale the fact that there were rumors about the victim's relationships with various men, but I don't mention any names. No sense in repeating gossip second hand, especially when I don't know how many hands it went through before *I* got it.

After my chat with Ragsdale, I sit on a tree stump to think. If Sterling Pillwiler is telling me the truth, there could have been a whole committee of murderers out this fine morning swinging axes at Mary Delgado. But I'm pretty sure there's just one murderer.

Annie Valmont, my ax-throwing mentor, picks that moment to come up and touch base. I'm not really sure I want to talk to her just now, but, hell, Gorgon, if you have to play amateur detective, you can't dodge all unpleasantness, can you?

She sits on the wide stump beside me. "I never expected a day like this, Ed."

"No. How well did you know Mary Delgado, Annie?"

"Not very well, but we were friendly. She was a really nice person, Ed, and this town didn't show her its best."

"I've heard some talk about—"

"Her and Tony Williamson, yeah, I know. Tony's a real bastard. Tries to rape her and then makes out she egged him on."

"He tried to rape her?"

"Oh, yeah, and then saved his male hide by making out it was a mutual romance with most of the fault on her side. Cindy apparently bought it, and worse for Mary, that macho twit Carlos bought it, too. I've heard of blaming the victim, but this business carried it to new heights. To be fair, I think Carlos came around finally. He should feel lucky to have her. The only reason she agreed to enter the Timber Festival was to help him get publicity for their restaurant. And she managed to get good in one event, I'll give her that much."

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I'm not sure where to go from here. "Annie, in a little town like this, there's a lot of rumor . . . "

She throws me a bitter grin. "Tell me about it."

"I'd been getting the idea Mary was a real temptress, that she went after half the husbands in Clydewood."

"Another triumph for the Loyal Order of Sidewinders if so. Those guys are well named. But don't believe everything you hear, Ed."

"I even heard that your husband Gaston was one of them."

"A Sidewinder? No, Gaston's no joiner."

Wondering if she misunderstood on purpose, I clarify, "I mean one of the men involved with Mary Delgado."

Annie's shriek of laughter is amazing. Not shocked, not bitter, not hysterical, nothing but genuinely amused.

"Gaston? Oh, my God, Ed. That is so ridiculous. I mean, if you knew Gaston—"

"Isn't he alone a lot in that studio of his, while you're off at work?"

"Well, sure, but if he had any female visitors, there are plenty of small-town inquiring eyes around to take notes and report, believe me."

"Doesn't he use models ever?"

She shakes her head positively. "Never. He doesn't do portrait art or figure art either. Ed, if it weren't so off-the-wall and absurd, I'd be angry with you. In fact, I should be anyway. I think I will." She tries to look cross but immediately loses it in more laughter, now with a slight note of hysteria in it, as if the events of the day are wearing on her. After a minute, she sobers abruptly. "I didn't expect that kind of laugh today, Ed, after what happened. Maybe I should thank you for a good joke, or maybe that's another reason I should be mad at you. Who knows?"

I'm impressed Annie feels so confident about her husband's fidelity. I can't believe she's faking it. But still, even she could be deceived. So I keep asking questions.

Carlos Delgado is the person I'd really like to talk to, but understandably he isn't hanging around. I do manage to find out from Deputy Forbes, who keeps looking over his shoulder to make sure Ragsdale isn't watching our conversation, that Carlos denies knowing who gave Mary a lift to the practice ground. He says he knew she was going out early to practice and that he arranged to meet her there later. She said she wouldn't need the car, and he didn't press her about it. Insists he trusted her. Maybe he's lying. Or maybe

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he has good reason to trust her and her bad reputation is a product of a little town's heated imagination.

I corner Gene Bellows again, asking him to expand on his earlier crack about how many people Mary got to know.

He looks uncomfortable. "She was a real tease, Ed, that's what she was. More than just friendly."

"Town rumor says you had an affair with her yourself, Gene."

"Not true, but if I look guilty"—he does—"I'll admit I made a pass at her once. I was half drunk and didn't get anywhere, except in trouble with my wife." Gene grins kind of wryly. "Never marry a psychologist, Ed, or get one mad at you. They have ways of getting at you that would never even occur to us ordinary mortals."

That bit of advice is unneeded at my present time of life, I'm pretty sure.

"Was your wife there when it happened?"

Gene looks alarmed now. "You mean when Mary was killed? She's at a professional conference in Riverside. Left yesterday morning."

"I meant was she there when you made the pass at Mary."

"Oh," he says, relieved. "No, I'm not quite that dumb, even when I'm drunk. But she got a report from Claire Pillwiler."

"Sterling's wife?"

"Yeah. She's got some kind of chronic degenerative disease, doesn't get out much any more. And when she did, she spent most of her time gathering gossip and reporting it where it would hurt the most. She and Sterling could start their own Clydewood tabloid if they wanted."

With that information in hand, I leave Gene Bellows and move on to another repeat subject.

"I've got some conclusions for your story, Sterling," I tell him. The reporter/photographer carefully lays his camera down on a nearby stump and whips out his notebook. He looks eager. Well, he should—there might be a Pulitzer Prize in this story after all if he tells it just right, and he has a unique vantage point to tell it from.

"Here's what I think, Sterling, and I'm telling you before I even tell the sheriff's people. It's just an opinion, you understand."

The guy's practically drooling over the great copy I'm going to give him.

"Mary Delgado was a nice, friendly person, but some people read her the wrong way. Tony Williamson good as tried to rape her, and the local gossip-lines turned it into an affair with her as much or

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more at fault than he was. Other guys took her reputation at face value and tried her on. When they got rebuffed, they got their revenge by blacking her name further."

"Sounds to me like you've been talking to some people she really did have fooled, Mr. Gorgon. I'm telling you, she was a tramp."

"Now, you tell me, Sterling. If she was as bad as she was supposed to be, would her husband be directing his anger so exclusively at Tony Williamson? And wouldn't he be sure to have her account for where she was whenever she was out of his sight? He says he didn't know who was going to drive her to her practice this morning and he didn't even care."

"If Delgado says that, he must be lying," Sterling insists, not seeming quite as eager as before to hear my theory of the case. "He probably drove her out here and killed her himself."

"There's another possibility. Try this alternative."

He hangs onto the notebook, his pencil clenched in his hand, but I haven't seen him take a note lately.

"I learned two interesting things about Mary Delgado. Number one, she always practiced alone because her unusual style made her self-conscious in front of the other competitors. Number two, she only entered the Timber Games to get publicity for her husband's restaurant. So who would she have agreed to come out early in the morning with, before anybody else was here? Another competitor? No. But somebody who could get her some publicity, maybe take pictures of her for the local paper? Just maybe so.

"Why'd you want to tramp all over the grounds with your camera earlier, Sterling?" I ask. "To take pictures or to destroy as much evidence as you could?"

Sterling smiles kind of sickly. "What do you mean? You think I killed her?"

"I don't get the feeling you'd shed many tears if the killer got away with it."

"You got that right, Mr. Gorgon."

"Why do you hate her so much? Did you hear from your wife what a loose lady she was? Did you make an arrangement that would get her alone this morning so you could get in on what every other married man in town was supposed to be getting in on? Did she reject you in no uncertain terms? Did you pick up the ax in a rage and take off the back of her skull with it, then flee and hope it would be taken for an accident? There's no telling what clues you might

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have left out here for the sheriff's men to find, Sterling. Fingerprints on the ax, maybe?"

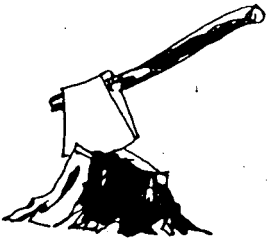
He shakes his head spasmodically, and I figure he's covered that possibility or thinks he has. But looking at his face, I know good and well I've read things right.

"You couldn't have planned it, Sterling. You wouldn't be that dumb. She might have told her husband or somebody else who was driving her to her practice session. You might even get by with second-degree murder."

Why am I reassuring the bastard? I hope they lock him up and throw the key away.

I turn around and see Ragsdale and Forbes walking toward us. The county's homicide specialist has a grin on his face, like there's a big joke on me.

"That lead's a washout, Mr. Gorgon," he says, a little more friendly now. "Folks up the road didn't see a single car turn down here this morning before yours. 'Cept old Woodward-and-Bernstein's here."



DETECTIVERSE

ANOTHER GRAVE TONE

by JAMES HOLDING

Here lies an arsonist, Sonny Myers,
Who started at least a dozen fires.
Ironically, one of the fires he started
Is the reason why he is now departed.
"Poetic justice," the coroner said.
"He fell asleep while smoking in bed."

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It had been Bill's defence that he had driven for the robbers but that, due to the police closing in before the time appointed to share out, he had never collected his cut. Maggie didn't blame the police for not believing that, but Bill had told her the same thing when they were alone and she thought it was probably the truth. For one thing, it would be an unlikely departure from Bill's run of luck to have something other than her waiting when he came out of prison . . .

THE GARDEN PARTY

by JO BANNISTER

After the van had gone, leaving Maggie Stickers's furniture piled eaves-high in the garage, the boys raced down the overgrown garden to hunt for frogs around the murky pond, leaving Maggie alone with her father.

For a while they were content to share a companionable silence, leaning their elbows on the fence and looking out over the fields. Bees hummed; somewhere a tractor was taking an early cut of hay. The only other sounds were birdsong and the sudden shouts of the hunters sighting their quarry.

Maggie said, by way of explanation, "It's been a long day. They're always noisy when they're tired. I'll give them half an hour to unwind, then make some supper and get them off to bed."

Jack Smedley shrugged. Maggie's twins had not been a part of the retirement he had planned for himself, but his own hopes had had to go on the back burner when Maggie's latest crisis boiled over. Nor did he begrudge his help. He could think of worse things than sharing his cottage with a couple of nine-year-olds, and one of them was watching his daughter trying to raise them alone in a big city on not enough money.

As the light began to go out of the day, Maggie turned to him. Her face was weary, her eyes dispirited. Failure sat heavy on her shoulders; somehow the spring had gone out of her red hair. But in

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her voice there was acceptance, relief even. This hadn't been what she had wanted either, but she was grateful for it.

"It all happened so—" she shrugged helplessly "—quickly in the end, I've hardly had the chance to say thanks, Dad."

Jack put a heavy arm round her shoulders. "No need, love. I'm glad I could help out."

She squeezed against him. "You always help, Dad. You've always been here for me—for us. I'd hoped to avoid invading you like this, but—" He felt a sob shudder through her frame and for a moment, because it was the end of a long day and because they were alone, she let her voice crack. "I don't know where we'd have gone if we hadn't come here."

He held her against his thick side, under his spread wing like a hen. "Maggie, old men aren't good for much. It's a privilege to be able to offer a refuge to my daughter and my grandsons at a point in their lives when they can use it. Nobody's needed me since your mum died. It's good to be needed."

"It won't be forever," she promised, drying her eyes. "We'll sort ourselves out and get out of your hair. Only right now I think you're all that stands between me and the abyss." She smiled but it wasn't a joke.

"You stay as long as you want," he said. "And when you're ready to go, you go. I know you'll get your lives back together again—when Bill's out if not before. I know I haven't got you for always. But I'm glad I've got you for now."

Maggie blew her nose. "I'll try and keep the boys quiet. I know they're a bit boisterous, but they will make an effort. They'll miss their friends at first but they'll settle down."

Jack Smedley gave a little chuckle that started deep under his braces somewhere. "Noise, hen, is the last thing I have to worry about. The nearest neighbours are half a mile away, and if I want a bit of peace and quiet all I have to do is turn off my hearing aid." Then he doffed his battered linen hat and, grinning, scratched his bald pate. "And while we're on the subject of the physical degeneration of the elderly, let's have no more cracks about getting into Granddad's hair."

Later, when the boys were in bed—their own beds, surrounded by as many of their own belongings as there was room for in the little roof-space bedroom—Jack and Maggie talked about the events which had cost her her home.

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"Five years this time, Dad. Five years. The boys'll be halfway through secondary-school when he gets out."

"He got five, he'll be out in three," Jack said briskly. "I'll say that for your Bill, he knows how to do his time. No trouble, get it served and get out."

"He should do," Maggie said bitterly, "God knows he's had enough practice. Oh, Dad—how could he be so stupid? Again?"

Jack shrugged. "Force of habit, I guess. Some people bite their fingernails, some pick their noses—your Bill when he's got time on his hands goes out and does a burglary. When it slips his mind that he's not supposed to."

"I wouldn't care if he was better at it," exploded Maggie. "If he didn't get caught *every single time!*"

"Yes you would."

"Yes, I would," she admitted, "but at least I'd see something of him. Other than across a formica table."

"Have you told him about the house?"

She leaned back in her chair and her eyes went distant. "I had to. I couldn't have kept it from him even if I'd wanted. And to be honest, I'm not sure I wanted to."

"What did he say?"

She sighed. "Oh, the usual. This was the last time. He'd make it up to us. Once he's out he'll get us a little house of our own that nobody can take away because we fall behind with the rent."

"Did he mean it, do you think?"

"Oh, he meant it. He always means to go straight, when he's behind bars. He's a good man, basically. I don't know if you can understand that. But he's a good husband, a good father. God knows we've had our problems but I do love him, Dad, still. The trouble is, working's harder than thieving. When he's working all week for the price of a Sheffield plate candlestick that'd slip in his pocket, his resolve begins to weaken."

"Maybe this time it isn't just talk. Maybe this time he'll find some way to give you a bit of security."

Maggie threw him a grin. "You've been reading the tabloids again! You think Bill's got the haul from the wages heist stashed away for when he comes out." However hard she tried, and she did try very hard, particularly around her sons, Maggie could not discuss Bill's work without falling into the vernacular.

"Hasn't he?"

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She shook her head decisively. "No. The others got the money, Bill got the bird. Given the kind of people he works with, they'll have spent his share long before he gets out."

Jack looked doubtful. "I wouldn't know, of course. But the police seem to think it's a possibility. They were here a couple of times, you know, poking round, asking questions."

Maggie stared. "You didn't tell me."

Her father shrugged. "You'd enough to worry about. It didn't bother me—I made a pot of tea when they finished and we parted the best of friends. But I doubt if they'd have been wasting time on Bill's father-in-law's country cottage unless they'd reason to think he'd hidden the money somewhere. It was four days before they picked him up, remember. There was plenty of time to divvy up and for Bill to hide his share."

Maggie wasn't sure if her father was serious about this or indulging in a gentle leg-pull. She didn't begrudge him a bit of fun, if that's what it was. Like all of them, he'd been embarrassed enough by Bill's business to be entitled to a bit of fun at his expense now.

But if Jack was serious, he was going to be disappointed. It had been Bill's defence that he had driven for the robbers but that, due to the police closing in before the time appointed for the share out, he had never collected his cut. Maggie didn't blame the police for not believing that, but Bill had told her the same thing when they were alone and she thought it was probably the truth. For one thing, it would be an unlikely departure from Bill's run of luck to have something other than her waiting when he came out of prison.

But even if he had had the money, why would he have brought it to Jack Smedley's cottage at the back of beyond? He was a city boy, familiar with city streets and city ways. Would he have changed the habit of a lifetime to hide his pension fund in the depths of the country?

Jack shrugged. "He got quite fond of this place. He used to come down and see me sometimes. When you were at work and the boys were at school and he'd nothing better to do, I suppose. We'd sink a can of beer, tell each other this was the day we'd really get stuck into the garden, collect the scythe and the hedge-clippers from the garage and go stand beside the pond for a bit, and maybe hack at the odd thistle . . . Then we'd look up at the sun and mop our brows.

"And before long, we'd look at our watches, and remark that actually we had other things we had to do today, and make a firm pledge that next time he came down we'd spend the whole day clearing the

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garden and not stop until you could see the pond before you fell in it. Then we'd split another can and put the tools away, and he'd get back in the car, and that would be that for another couple of months."

Maggie smiled. It was a pocket description of her husband's relationship with work since she'd first known him. He'd never been worth a damn. And yet she loved him; and people who had no reason to love him liked him. Even the police. He was a nice man, a decent man; and only incidentally a thief.

She said, "Do you remember the plans you had for the garden when you came here, Dad? It was going to be lawns from the house to the pond and shrub roses beyond. And the pond itself would have a brick path round it and a fountain, and Koi carp to catch the sun."

Jack chuckled again, shrugging himself deeper into his armchair. "I've got older these last few years, hen. These days I do more talking about the garden than working in it. Maybe when Bill's out we'll get stuck in, get it looking like something."

But Maggie wasn't thinking that far ahead. In ten years of marriage she had learnt to be self-sufficient, at least not to depend on Bill. The financial crisis prompted by his latest conviction had deprived her of her home and, since that meant moving, her job. The obverse of that was that now she had time on her hands, and two growing boys to keep occupied, and the chance to repay her father something of what he had done for her.

She said nothing to Jack. But the next day she told the boys, under a seal of secrecy, that the three of them were going to spend the summer laying out Granddad's garden, to thank him for putting a roof over their heads. It would be hard work for many weeks, but when finished it would be lasting testimony that three out of four Stickers could give as well as take.

After an initial reluctance—she was terrified of them growing up with their father's attitude to work—they accepted the fairness of this and began to wax enthusiastic about what could be done with the Mato Grosso out back.

That evening she sat down to write of her plans to Bill. "It'll take time, God knows, and blood, sweat, toil, and tears as well. But we'll get there eventually. I want him to have his garden, and his pond with the Koi carp in it, to enjoy when we finally get our act together and leave."

The reply came back more quickly than she expected. "On no account," Bill had written, underlining the words with a heavy wavering line, "are you to dig in Jack's garden."

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Maggie was still puzzling over the letter, with its uncharacteristic insistency, when the doorbell rang. The boys were hacking at the weeds beside the pond, covering themselves with little green burrs she had to pick out of their clothes every evening, and Jack was snoring in front of the television so she went to answer it.

She could not have been more surprised if she'd found the Tooth Fairy on the doorstep. "Mr. Dick? Whatever are you doing this far from town?"

Detective Inspector Dick had been pursuing Bill Stickers with a view to making him amenable for one crime or another so long he was almost like family. There was no malice in it: the man was doing his job, and doing it rather better than Bill did his, and if Maggie was never exactly glad to see him, at least she could appreciate the courtesy he had always shown her and the children. She would not have been surprised to receive a discreetly worded Christmas card from him some year.

But that was when they lived in the pulsing heart of his inner-city manor and Bill was worth interviewing in connection with any crime from smash-and-grab to the gentler kind of bank robbery. Bill wasn't a leading light of the criminal fraternity, but as a bit-player he was in regular work.

But now Bill was in Wormwood Scrubs, and Maggie and the boys were living with her father twenty miles from the city, and she couldn't imagine what DI Dick wanted. No one could suspect Bill of masterminding great criminal enterprises from behind bars, and he'd been in custody for the last seven months.

DI Dick had the grace to look faintly embarrassed. He was a tall, narrow, scholarly-looking man with a thin moustache. He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Stickers. I expect you hoped you'd seen the last of me. But something's come up, and—well. Is your father at home?"

"My father?" Maggie was more astounded than ever. No one had ever accused Jack Smedley of riding in a first-class compartment with a second-class ticket. "I think he's having a doze. What do you want with Dad?"

DI Dick tugged unhappily at one side of his moustache. "Would you wake him up, please? I'm afraid we've got a warrant to search his property." That was when Maggie saw that the tall policeman was not alone but accompanied by a detachment of young men in navy-blue overalls carrying spades.

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Jack remembered DI Dick from his earlier visits at the time of Bill's arrest. He didn't mind the police searching again. "But the garage is stuffed to the rafters with Maggie's furniture. If you want to move that lot you'll be here all day."

The inspector was relieved at his lack of hostility. "Actually, it's not so much the buildings I'm interested in as the garden."

"The garden?"

"Bill used to help you with the garden, didn't he? Last summer, before he went into the wages business."

Jack considered for a moment. "Well, he used to offer to help. Mostly it involved leaning on a shovel." He grinned. "I'd have noticed him digging a hole big enough to hide a strongbox in."

DI Dick smiled too. "I'm sure you would, Mr. Smedley; and I imagine you'd have dug it up again and returned it. No, Bill wouldn't have done it with you there. But that money went somewhere. It hasn't surfaced in seven months, and if Bill did hide it he might have brought it here—sometime when you were out, perhaps, or at night. He knew he was going to do time. He'd be looking for somewhere it wouldn't be touched for maybe five or six years." His gaze slid down the garden to where the toiling twins were just visible through the nettles. "No offence, Mr. Smedley, but I'd have thought of your garden too."

Jack wasn't offended. "So what do you want to do?"

"We'd like to have a good look at the ground surface, see whether it's been broken up in the last eight months. I don't suppose you noticed any disturbance to the undergrowth about the time we're talking of?"

Jack thought a moment, then shrugged. "Sorry, Inspector. For the last twelve months I've been trying not to look too closely at that garden. A week ago you might have been able to see for yourself, but Maggie and the boys have been tidying it up for me. I don't know how you'll pick out a significant disturbance from the general mayhem."

DI Dick looked lugubrious. "Don't worry, Mr. Smedley. I didn't expect this to be easy. Digging up people's gardens is the main reason for recruiting beefy young constables hardly out of their teens. God knows it's years before they're any use as policemen."

They laboured all that day and most of the next. First they cleared the undergrowth, many hands and sharp tools putting to shame the efforts of three Stickers with a blunt scythe. Then they prodded the earth with steel rods. Wherever they met less than expected

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resistance they dug. But all they found were three rusty horseshoes and a bucket without a bottom.

About noon on the second day, surveying the scene with disfavour, DI Dick shook his head sadly and said to his sergeant, "Wrap it up. And don't leave it looking like a bomb-site. Level it off a bit—it's the least we can do."

When they had gone, Jack and Maggie and the two boys stood beside the house looking down the transformed garden. All the undergrowth had been piled on one side to await a bonfire. The topsoil looked as if it had been rotavated.

"Well," said Jack, thoughtfully, and then they went to bed.

Maggie wrote to Bill about the excitement. "We bought some fireworks and I made sausage-rolls to have with the bonfire. Once we've got our breath back we're going to start clearing the pond."

Bill's reply couldn't have come more quickly if the prison governor had brought it down on his afternoon off. It was written mostly in block capitals and underlined three times in a different colour. "WHATEVER ELSE YOU DO, DON'T DRAIN THE POND."

Maggie was still staring at it, wondering if her father and the police could possibly be right, if Bill could possibly have done something clever for once, when the doorbell went again. Again she answered it; again it was Detective Inspector Dick. Again he was accompanied by young men in navy-blue overalls.

Then Maggie understood. "Don't tell me: you've come to drain the pond."

DI Dick was seriously discomfited. "I'm very sorry, Mrs. Stickers. But we have to do these things. Letters from prisoners have to be examined, and any information that could help us solve a crime has to be followed up."

She held the door wide. "Come in. You know we won't stand in your way. Dad, Mr. Dick wants to clear the pond."

The pond didn't take as long as the garden had but it was much, much messier. Great rafts of weed, brown and stinking, matted the surface of the water and dropped slimy tendrils down to the bottom. It all had to be raked out and disposed of. The navy-blue overalls turned brown and green and stank of decay. The beefy young constables wished they'd followed their mothers' advice and become bankers.

Below the weed, below the water, the pond was knee-deep in mud. One luckless officer in thigh-boots waded through the murk looking for a bung-hole. When he couldn't locate it with his feet, he groped

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with his hands, the water coming up to his shoulders. But there didn't seem to be one. Finally they drained the pond by syphoning the water out with a hosepipe. Clots of weed clogged it repeatedly and had to be cleared. The ripe and rotten water was syphoned onto the rotavated ground where it sank in, reeking of fertility.

The last stage was to shovel the mud out. It was thick, viscid, and heavy. It could have hid a strongbox or any number of plastic bags. The constables dug carefully to preserve any evidence that might be sleeping under the slimy counterpane.

When the mud had joined the muddy water on the scourged ground, and all it had yielded was another rusty horseshoe and the skeleton of a cat, silently Maggie brought out a tray of mugs and a big pot of tea, and a bucket of warm water and a sponge, and left the unhappy policemen to clean themselves up as best they could.

Before he took them away, DI Dick said darkly to Maggie, "Have you ever had the feeling you've been taken for a ride?"

"Oh, yes," Maggie said, honestly. "The first time was when my wedding ring appeared on 'Police Six.' "

The inspector chuckled. "Oh well, we've done our best. The money really isn't here. Or if it is, he's hidden it so well it'd take a cleverer man than me to find it. I don't think we'll be back, Mrs. Stickers. Give Bill my regards when you write. And tell your father I'm sorry for all the mess. We've cleaned the place up as best we can."

Maggie saw him to the door. But that wasn't quite the last she saw of Detective Inspector Dick.

She wrote to Bill, describing the pantomime in the back garden, the mud, the smell. "They made a grand job of tidying up, though," she wrote, to forestall any anger he might feel about the police intrusion. "They practically scrubbed the pond out before they left. The garden smells as if you could grow rubber trees in it."

She was a little while waiting for a reply this time. When it came it was delivered by hand—not by the prison governor but by Detective Inspector Dick. She could see by his face that he had already read it. She could not judge from his expression what he had found there. While he stood watching, she opened the letter and read.

Afterwards, they walked down the garden together. All the constables' work was already paying dividends. The garden was a raked tilth ready to plant; the pond was a clean concrete bowl ready to fill. It would have taken Maggie and the boys all summer to achieve the same result.

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DI Dick said, "We underestimated your Bill."

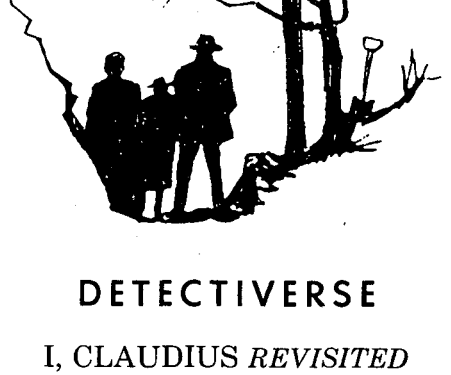
"Yes," agreed Maggie. "It doesn't happen very often."

The policeman smiled. "Well, nobody's going to begrudge you a bit of good luck for a change."

"Luck," she said, "had nothing to do with it."

He said goodbye then, leaving her beside the pool. As he walked back to his car, she read Bill's letter again. She was a good woman, honest, law-abiding within the bounds of the hand fate had dealt her. But she couldn't resist a smile of sheer pleasure at its contents.

"Tell Mr. Dick there really isn't any money," Bill had written. "At least, there was but I never saw any of it. But thank him for his help with the garden. All you have to do now is plant Jack's lawn and get some goldfish for his pond."



DETECTIVERSE

I, CLAUDIUS *REVISITED*

by ANNE WINGATE

Livia, empress of Rome,
Had a very high death rate at home.
  Her rank was revered,
  But her dinners were feared,
Which pared food expense to the bone.

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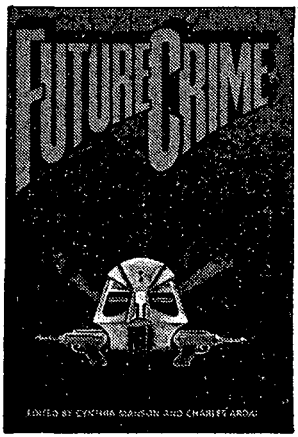

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a distinguished Brother Cadfael story by

ELLIS PETERS

In the years since Brother Cadfael first came to life in A Morbid Taste for Bones, *he has become one of the best-loved of ecclesiastical detectives. But what of his life before he took orders? "A Light on the Road to Woodstock" finds Cadfael just returned from war in Normandy and soon to be embroiled in a treacherous conflict between the monks of Shrewsbury Abbey and a lord to whom he has sworn temporary fealty. By the time Cadfael realizes what evil is afoot, he has taken a turning that will lead to a different future . . .*

A LIGHT ON THE ROAD TO WOODSTOCK

by ELLIS PETERS

The King's court was in no hurry to return to England, that late autumn of 1120, even though the fighting, somewhat desultory in these last stages, was long over, and the enforced peace sealed by a royal marriage. King Henry had brought to a successful conclusion his sixteen years of patient, cunning, relentless plotting, fighting, and manipulating, and could now sit back in high content, master not only of England but of Normandy, too. What the Conqueror had misguidedly dealt out in two separate parcels to his two elder sons, his youngest son had now put together again and clamped into one. Not without a hand in removing from the light of day, some said, both of his brothers, one of whom had been shovelled into a hasty grave under the tower of Winchester, while the other was a prisoner in Devizes, and unlikely ever to be seen again by the outer world.

The court could well afford to linger to enjoy victory, while Henry trimmed into neatness the last loose edges still to be made secure.

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But his fleet was already preparing at Barfleur for the voyage back to England, and he would be home before the month ended. Meantime, many of his barons and knights who had fought his battles were withdrawing their contingents and making for home, among them one Roger Mauduit, who had a young and handsome wife waiting for him, certain legal business on his mind, and twenty-five men to ship back to England, most of them to be paid off on landing.

There were one or two among the miscellaneous riffraff he had recruited here in Normandy on his lord's behalf whom it might be worth keeping on in his own service, along with the few men of his household, at least until he was safely home. The vagabond clerk turned soldier, let him be unfrocked priest or what he might, was an excellent copyist and a sound Latin scholar, and could put legal documents in their best and most presentable form, in good time for the King's court at Woodstock. And the Welsh man-at-arms, blunt and insubordinate as he was, was also experienced and accomplished in arms, a man of his word, once given, and utterly reliable in whatever situation on land or sea, for in both elements he had long practice behind him. Roger was well aware that he was not greatly loved, and had little faith in either the valour or the loyalty of his own men. But this Welshman from Gwynedd, by way of Antioch and Jerusalem and only God knew where else, had imbibed the code of arms and wore it as a second nature. With or without love, such service as he pledged, that he would provide.

Roger put it to them both as his men were embarking at Barfleur, in the middle of a deceptively placid November, and upon a calm sea.

"I would have you two accompany me to my manor of Sutton Mauduit by Northampton, when we disembark, and stay in my pay until a certain lawsuit I have against the abbey of Shrewsbury is resolved. The King intends to come to Woodstock when he arrives in England, and will be there to preside over my case on the twenty-third day of this month. Will you remain in my service until that day?"

The Welshman said that he would, until that day or until the case was resolved. He said it indifferently, as one who has not business of any importance anywhere in the world to pull him in another direction. As well Northampton as anywhere else. As well Woodstock. And after Woodstock? Why anywhere in particular? There was no identifiable light beckoning him anywhere, along any road. The world was wide, fair, and full of savour, but without signposts.

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Alard, the tatterdemalion clerk, hesitated, scratched his thick thatch of grizzled red hair, and finally also said yes, but as if some vague regret drew him in another direction. It meant pay for some days more, he could not afford to say no.

"I would have gone with him with better heart," he said later, when they were leaning on the rail together, watching the low blue line of the English shore rise out of a placid sea, "if he had been taking a more westerly road."

"Why that?" asked Cadfael ap Meilyr ap Dafydd. "Have you kin in the west?"

"I had once. I have not now."

"Dead?"

"I am the one who died." Alard heaved lean shoulders in a helpless shrug, and grinned. "Fifty-seven brothers I had, and now I'm brotherless. I begin to miss my kin, now I'm past forty. I never valued them when I was young." He slanted a rueful glance at his companion and shook his head. "I was a monk of Evesham, an *oblatus,* given to God by my father when I was five years old. When I was fifteen I could no longer abide to live my life in one place, and I ran. Stability is one of the vows we take—to be content in one place, and go abroad only when ordered. That was not for me, not then. My sort they call *vagus*—frivolous minds that must wander. Well, I've wandered far enough, God knows, in my time. I began to fear I can never stand still again."

The Welshman drew his cloak about him against the chill of the wind. "Are you hankering for a return?"

"Even you seamen must drop anchor somewhere at last," said Alard. "They'd have my hide if I went back, that I know. But there's this about penance, it pays all debts, and leaves the record clear. They'd find a place for me, once I'd paid. But I don't know . . . I don't know . . . The *vagus* is still in me. I'm torn two ways."

"After twenty-five years," said Cadfael, "a month or two more for quiet thinking can do no harm. Copy his papers for him and take the case until his business is settled."

They were much of an age, though the renegade monk looked the elder by ten years, and much knocked about by the world he had coveted from within the cloister. It had not paid him well in goods or gear, for he went threadbare and thin, but in wisdom he might have got his fair wages. A little soldiering, a little clerking, some horsetending, any labour that came to hand, until he could turn his hand to almost anything a hale man can do. He had seen, he said,

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Italy as far south as Rome, served once for a time under the Court of Flanders, crossed the mountains into Spain, never abiding anywhere for long. His feet still served him, but his mind grew weary of the road.

"And you?" he said, eyeing his companion, whom he had known now for a year in this last campaign. "You're something of a *vagus* yourself, by your own account. All those years crusading and battling corsairs in the midland sea, and still you have not enough of it, but must cross the sea again to get buffeted about Normandy. Had you no better business of your own, once you got back to England, but you must enlist again in this muddled mêlée of a war? No woman to take your mind off fighting?"

"What of yourself? Free of the cloister, free of the vows!"

"Somehow," said Alard, himself puzzled, "I never saw it so. A woman here and there, yes, when the heat was on me, and there was a woman by and willing, but marriage and wiving . . . it never seemed to me I had the right."

The Welshman braced his feet on the gently swaying deck and watched the distant shore draw nearer. A broad-set, sturdy, muscular man in his healthy prime, brown-haired and brown-skinned from eastern suns and outdoor living, well-provided in leather coat and good cloth, and well-armed with sword and dagger. A comely enough face, strongly featured, with the bold bones of his race—there had been women in his time, who found him handsome.

"I had a girl," he said meditatively, "years back, before ever I went crusading. But I left her when I took the Cross, left her for three years and stayed away seventeen. The truth is, in the east I forgot her, and in the west she, thanks be to God, had forgotten me. I did enquire, when I got back. She's made a better bargain, and married a decent, solid man who had nothing of the *vagus* in him. A guildsman and counsellor of the town of Shrewsbury, no less. So I shed the load from my conscience and went back to what I knew, soldiering. With no regrets," he said simply. "It was all over and done, years since. I doubt if I should have known her again, or she me." There had been other women's faces in the years between, still vivid in his memory, while hers had faded into mist.

"And what will you do," asked Alard, "now the King's got everything he wanted, married his son to Anjou and Maine, and made an end of fighting? Go back to the east? There's never any want of squabbles there to keep a man busy."

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"No," said Cadfael, eyes fixed on the shore that began to show the solidity of land and the undulations of cliff and down. For that, too, was over and done, years since, and not as well done as once he had hoped. This desultory campaigning in Normandy was little more than a postscriptum, an afterthought, a means of filling in the interim between what was past and what was to come, and as yet unrevealed. All he knew of it was that it must be something new and momentous, a door opening into another room. "It seems we have both a few days' grace, you and I, to find out where we are going. We'd best make good use of the time."

There was stir enough before night to keep them from wondering beyond the next moment, or troubling their minds about what was past or what was to come. Their ship put into the roads with a steady and favourable wind, and made course into Southampton before the light faded, and there was work for Alard checking the gear as it was unloaded, and for Cadfael disembarking the horses. A night's sleep in lodgings and stables in the town, and they would be on their way with the dawn.

"So the King's due in Woodstock," said Alard, rustling sleepily in his straw in a warm loft over the horses, "in time to sit in judgement on the twenty-third of the month. He makes his forest lodges the hub of his kingdom; there's more statecraft talked at Woodstock, so they say, than ever at Westminster. And he keeps his beasts there—lions and leopards—even camels. Did you ever see camels, Cadfael? There in the east?"

"Saw them and rode them. Common as horses there, hard-working and serviceable, but uncomfortable riding, and foul-tempered. Thank God it's horses we'll be mounting in the morning." And after a long silence, on the edge of sleep, he asked curiously into the straw-scented darkness: "If ever you do go back, what is it you want of Evesham?"

"Do I know?" responded Alard drowsily, and followed that with a sudden sharpening sigh, again fully awake. "The silence, it might be . . . or the stillness. To have no more running to do . . . to have arrived, and have no more need to run. The appetite changes. Now I think it would be a beautiful thing to be still."

The manor which was the head of Roger Mauduit's scattered and substantial honour lay somewhat southeast of Northampton, comfortably under the lee of the long ridge of wooded hills where the King had a chase, and spreading its extensive fields over the rich

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lowland between. The house was of stone, and ample, over a deep undercroft, and with a low tower providing two small chambers at the eastern end, and the array of sturdy byres, barns, and stables that lined the containing walls was impressive. Someone had proved a good steward while the lord was away about King Henry's business.

The furnishings of the hall were no less eloquent of good management, and the men and maids of the household went about their work with a brisk wariness that showed they went in some awe of whoever presided over their labours. It needed only a single day of watching the Lady Eadwina in action to show who ruled the roost here. Roger Mauduit had married a wife not only handsome, but also efficient and masterful. She had had her own way here for three years, and by all the signs had enjoyed the dominance. She might, even, be none too glad to resign her charge now, however glad she might be to have her lord home again.

She was a tall, graceful woman, ten years younger than Roger, with an abundance of fair hair, and large blue eyes that went discreetly half-veiled by absurdly long lashes most of the time, but flashed a bright and steely challenge when she opened them fully. Her smile was likewise discreet and almost constant, concealing rather than revealing whatever went on in her mind; and though her welcome to her returning lord left nothing to be desired, but lavished on him every possible tribute of ceremony and affection from the moment his horse entered at the gate, Cadfael could not but wonder whether she was not, at the same time, taking stock of every man he brought in with him, and every article of gear or harness or weaponry in their equipment, as one taking jealous inventory of his goods and reserves to make sure nothing was lacking.

She had her little son by the hand, a boy of about seven years old, and the child had the same fair colouring, the same contained and almost supercilious smile, and was as spruce and fine as his mother.

The lady received Alard with a sweeping glance that deprecated his tatterdemalion appearance and doubted his morality, but nevertheless was willing to accept and make use of his abilities. The clerk who kept the manor roll and the accounts was efficient enough, but had no Latin, and could not write a good court hand. Alard was whisked away to a small table set in the angle of the great hearth, and kept hard at work copying certain charters and letters, and preparing them for presentation.

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"This suit of his is against the abbey of Shrewsbury," said Alard, freed of his labours after supper in the hall. "I recall you said that girl of yours had married a merchant in that town. Shrewsbury is a Benedictine house, like mine of Evesham." His, he called it still, after so many years of abandoning it; or his again, after time had brushed away whatever division there had ever been. "You must know it, if you come from there."

"I was born in Trefriw, in Gwynedd," said Cadfael, "but I took service early with an English wool-merchant, and came to Shrewsbury with his household. Fourteen, I was then—in Wales fourteen is manhood, and as I was a good lad with the short bow, and took kindly to the sword, I suppose I was worth my keep. The best of my following years were spent in Shrewsbury, I know it like my own palm, abbey and all. My master sent me there a year and more, to get my letters. But I quit that service when he died. I'd pledged nothing to the son, and he was a poor shadow of his father. That was when I took the Cross. So did many like me, all afire. I won't say what followed was all ash, but it burned very low at times."

"It's Mauduit who holds this disputed land," said Alard, "and the abbey that sues to recover it, and the thing's been going on four years without a settlement, ever since the old man here died. From what I know of the Benedictines, I'd rate their honesty above our Roger's, I tell you straight. And yet his charters seem to be genuine, as far as I can tell."

"Where is this land they're fighting over?" asked Cadfael.

"It's a manor by the name of Rotesley, near Stretton, demesne, village, advowson of the church and all. It seems when the great earl was just dead and his abbey still building, Roger's father gave Rotesley to the abbey. No dispute about that, the charter's there to show it. But the abbey granted it back to him as tenant for life, to live out his latter years there undisturbed, Roger being then married and installed here at Sutton. That's where the dispute starts. The abbey claims it was clearly agreed the tenancy ended with the old man's death, that he himself understood it so, and intended it should be restored to the abbey as soon as he was out of it. While Roger says there was no such agreement to restore it unconditionally, but the tenancy was granted to the Mauduits, and ought to be hereditary. And so far he's hung on to it tooth and claw. After several hearings they remitted it to the King himself. And that's why you and I, my friend, will be off with his lordship to Woodstock the day after tomorrow."

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"And how do you rate his chances of success? He seems none too sure himself," said Cadfael, "to judge by his short temper and nail-biting this last day or so."

"Why, the charter could have been worded better. It says simply that the village is granted back in tenancy during the old man's lifetime, but fails to say anything about what shall happen afterwards, whatever may have been intended. From what I hear, they were on very good terms, Abbot Fulchered and the old lord, agreements between them on other matters in the manor book are worded as between men who trusted each other. The witnesses are all of them dead, as Abbot Fulchered is dead. It's one Godefrid now. But for all I know the abbey may hold letters that have passed between the two, and a letter is witness of intent, no less than a formal charter. All in good time we shall see."

The nobility still sat at the high table, in no haste to retire, Roger brooding over his wine, of which he had already drunk his fair share and more. Cadfael eyed them with interest, seen thus in a family setting. The boy had gone to his bed, hauled away by an elderly nurse, but the Lady Eadwina sat in close attendance at her lord's left hand, and kept his cup well filled, smiling her faint, demure smile. On her left sat a very fine young squire of about twenty-five years, deferential and discreet, with a smile somehow the male reflection of her own. The source of both was secret, the spring of their pleasure or amusement, or whatever caused them so to smile, remained private and slightly unnerving, like the carved stone smiles of certain very old statues Cadfael had seen in Greece, long ago. For all his mild, amiable, and ornamental appearance, combed and curled and courtly, he was a big, well set-up young fellow, with a set to his smooth jaw. Cadfael studied him with interest, for he was plainly privileged here.

"Goscelin," said Alard by way of explanation, following his friend's glance. "Her right-hand man while Roger was away."

Her left-hand man now, by the look of it, thought Cadfael. For her left hand and Goscelin's right were private under the table, while she spoke winningly into her husband's ear; and if those two hands were not paddling palms at this moment Cadfael was very much deceived. Above and below the drapings of the board were two different worlds. "I wonder," he said thoughtfully, "what she's breathing into Roger's ear now."

What the lady was breathing into her husband's ear was, in fact: "You fret over nothing, my lord. What does it matter how strong his

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proofs, if he never reaches Woodstock in time to present them? You know the law; if one party fails to appear, judgement is given for the other. The assize judges may allow more than one default if they please, but do you think King Henry will? Whoever fails of keeping tryst with him will be felled on the spot. And you know the road by which Prior Heribert must come." Her voice was a silken purr in his ear. "And have you not a hunting lodge in the forest north of Woodstock, through which that road passes?"

Roger's hand had stiffened round the stem of his wine cup. He was not so drunk but he was listening intently.

"Shrewsbury to Woodstock will be a two- or three-day journey to such a rider. All you need do is have a watcher on the road north of you, to give warning. The woods are thick enough, masterless men have been known to haunt there. Even if he comes by daylight, your part need never be known. Hide him but a few days, it will be long enough. Then turn him loose by night, and who's ever to know what footpads held and robbed him? You need not ever touch his parchments—robbers would count them worthless. Take what common thieves would take, and theirs will be the blame."

Roger opened his tight-shut mouth to say in a doubtful growl: "He'll not be travelling alone."

"Hah! Two or three abbey servants—they'll run like hares. You need not trouble yourself over them. Three stout, silent men of your own will be more than enough."

He brooded, and began to think so, too, and to review in his mind the men of his household, seeking the right hands for such work. Not the Welshman and the clerk, the strangers here; their part was to be the honest onlookers, in case there should ever be questions asked.

They left Sutton Mauduit on the twentieth day of November, which seemed unnecessarily early, though as Roger had decreed that they should settle in his hunting lodge in the forest close by Woodstock, which meant conveying stores with them to make the household habitable and provision it for a party for, presumably, a stay of three nights at least, it was perhaps a wise precaution. Roger was taking no chances in his suit, he said; he meant to be established on the ground in good time, and have all his proofs in order.

"But so he has," said Alard, pricked in his professional pride, "for I've gone over everything with him, and the case, if open in default of specific instructions, is plain enough and will stand up. What the

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abbey can muster, who knows? They say the abbot is not well, which is why his prior comes in his place. My work is done."

He had the faraway look in his eye, as the party rode out and faced westward, of one either penned and longing to be where he could but see, or loose and weary and being drawn home. Either a *vagus* escaping outward, or a penitent flying back in haste before the doors should close against him. There must indeed be something desirable and lovely to cause a man to look towards it with that look on his face.

Three men-at-arms and two grooms accompanied Roger, in addition to Alard and Cadfael, whose term of service would end with the session in court, after which they might go where they would. Cadfael horsed, since he owned his own mount, Alard afoot, since the pony he rode belonged to Roger. It came as something of a surprise to Cadfael that the squire Goscelin should also saddle up and ride with the party, very debonair and well-armed with sword and dagger.

"I marvel," said Cadfael drily, "that the lady doesn't need him at home for her own protection, while her lord's absent."

The Lady Eadwina, however, bade farewell to the whole party with the greatest serenity, and to her husband with demonstrative affection, putting forward her little son to be embraced and kissed. Perhaps, thought Cadfael, relenting, I do her wrong, simply because I feel chilled by that smile of hers. For all I know she may be the truest wife living.

They set out early and before Buckingham made a halt at the small and penurious priory of Bradwell, where Roger elected to spend the night, keeping his three men-at-arms with him, while Goscelin with the rest of the party rode on to the hunting lodge to make all ready for their lord's reception the following day. It was growing dark by the time they arrived, and the bustle of kindling fire and torches, and unloading the bed linen and stores from the sumpter ponies went on into the night. The lodge was small, stockaded, well-furnished with stabling and mews, and in thick woodland, a place comfortable enough once they had a roaring fire on the hearth and food on the table.

"The road the prior of Shrewsbury will be coming by," said Alard, warming himself by the fire after supper, "passes through Evesham. As like as not they'll stay the last night there." With every mile west Cadfael had seen him straining forward with mounting eager-

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ness. "The road cannot be far away from us here, it passes through the forest."

"It must be nearly thirty miles to Evesham," said Cadfael. "A long day's riding for a clerical party. It will be night by the time they ride past into Woodstock. If you're set on going, stay at least to get your pay, for you'll need it before the thirty miles is done."

They went to their slumber in the warmth of the hall without a word more said. But he would go, Alard, whether he himself knew it yet or not. Cadfael knew it. His friend was a tired horse with the scent of the stable in his nostrils; nothing would stop him now until he reached it.

It was well into the middle of the day when Roger and his escort arrived, and they approached not directly, as the advance party had done, but from the woods to the north, as though they had been indulging in a little hunting or hawking by the way, except that they had neither hawk nor hound with them. A fine, clear, cool day for riding, there was no reason in the world why they should not go roundabout for the pure pleasure of it—and indeed, they seemed to come in high content!—but that Roger's mind had been so preoccupied and so anxious concerning his lawsuit that distractions seemed unlikely. Cadfael was given to thinking about unlikely developments, which from old campaigns he knew to prove significant in most cases. Goscelin, who was out at the gate to welcome them in, was apparently oblivious to the direction from which they came. That way lay Alard's highway to his rest. But what meaning ought it to have for Roger Mauduit?

The table was lavish that night, and lord and squire drank well and ate well, and gave no sign of any care, though they might, Cadfael thought, watching them from his lower place, seem a little tight, and knife-edged. Well, the King's court could account for that. Shrewsbury's prior was drawing steadily nearer, with whatever weapons he had for the battle. But it seemed rather an exultant tension than an anxious one. Was Roger counting his chickens already?

The morning of the twenty-second of November dawned, and the noon passed, and with every moment Alard's restlessness and abstraction grew, until with evening it possessed him utterly, and he could no longer resist. He presented himself before Roger after supper, when his mood might be mellow from good food and wine.

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"My lord, with the morrow my service to you is completed. You need me no longer, and with your goodwill I would set forth now for where I am going. I go afoot and need provision for the road. If you have been content with my work, pay me what is due, and let me go."

It seemed that Roger had been startled out of some equally absorbing preoccupation of his own, and was in haste to return to it, for he made no demur, but paid at once. To do him justice, he had never been a grudging paymaster. He drove as hard a bargain as he could at the outset, but once the agreement was made, he kept it.

"Go when you please," he said. "Fill your bag from the kitchen for the journey when you leave. You did good work, I give you that."

And he returned to whatever it was that so engrossed his thoughts, and Alard went to collect the proffered largesse and his own meagre possessions.

"I am going," he said, meeting Cadfael in the hall doorway. "I must go." There was no more doubt in voice or face. "They will take me back, though in the lowest place. From that there's no falling. The blessed Benedict wrote in the Rule that even to the third time of staying a man may be received again if he promise full amendment."

It was a dark night, without moon or stars but in fleeting moments when the wind ripped apart the cloud covering to let through a brief gleam of moonlight. The weather had grown gusty and wild in the last two days, the King's fleet must have had a rough crossing from Barfleur.

"You'd do better," urged Cadfael, "to wait for morning, and go by daylight. Here's a safe bed, and the King's peace, however well enforced, hardly covers every mile of the King's highroads."

But Alard would not wait. The yearning was on him too strongly, and a penniless vagabond who had ventured all the roads of Christendom by day or night was hardly likely to flinch from the last thirty miles of his wanderings.

"Then I'll go with you as far as the road, and see you on your way," said Cadfael.

There was a mile or so of track through thick forest between them and the highroad that bore away west-northwest on the upland journey to Evesham. The ribbon of open highway, hemmed on both sides by trees, was hardly less dark than the forest itself. King Henry had fenced in his private park at Woodstock to house his wild beasts, but maintained also his hunting chase here, many miles in

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extent. At the road they parted, and Cadfael stood to watch his friend march steadily away towards the west, eyes fixed ahead, upon his penance and his absolution, a tired man with a rest assured.

Cadfael turned back towards the lodge as soon as the receding shadow had melted into the night. He was in no haste to go in, for the night, though blustery, was not cold, and he was in no mind to seek the company of others of the party now that the one best known to him was gone, and gone in so mysteriously rapt a fashion. He walked on among the trees, turning his back on his bed for a while.

The constant thrashing of branches in the wind all but drowned the scuffling and shouting that suddenly broke out behind him, at some distance among the trees, until a horse's shrill whinny brought him about with a jerk, and set him running through the underbrush towards the spot where confused voices yelled alarm and broken bushes thrashed. The clamour seemed some little way off, and he was startled as he shouldered his way headlong through a thicket to collide heavily with two entangled bodies, send them spinning apart, and himself fall asprawl upon one of them in the flattened grass. The man under him uttered a scared and angry cry, and the voice was Roger's. The other man had made no sound at all, but slid away very rapidly and lightly to vanish among the trees, a tall shadow swallowed in shadows.

Cadfael drew off in haste, reaching an arm to hoist the winded man. "My lord, are you hurt? What in God's name is to do here?" The sleeve he clutched slid warm and wet under his hand. "You're injured! Hold fast, let's see what harm's done before you move . . . "

Then there was the voice of Goscelin, for once loud and vehement in alarm, shouting for his lord and crashing headlong through bush and brake to fall on his knees beside Roger, lamenting and raging.

"My lord, my lord, what happened here? What rogues were those, loose in the woods? Dared they waylay travellers so close to the King's highway? You're hurt—here's blood . . . "

Roger got his breath back and sat up, feeling at his left arm below the shoulder, and wincing. "A scratch. My arm . . . God curse him, whoever he may be, the fellow struck for my heart. Man, if you had not come charging like a bull, I might have been dead. You hurled me off the point of his dagger. Thank God, there's no great harm, but I bleed . . . Help me back home!"

"That a man may not walk by night in his own woods," fumed Goscelin, hoisting his lord carefully to his feet, "without being set upon by outlaws! Help here, you, Cadfael, take his other arm . . .

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Footpads so close to Woodstock! Tomorrow we must turn out the watch to comb these tracks and hunt them out of cover, before they kill . . ."

"Get me withindoors," snapped Roger, "and have this coat and shirt off me, and let's staunch this bleeding. I'm alive, that's the main!"

They helped him back between them, through the more open ways towards the lodge. It dawned on Cadfael, as they went, that the clamour of furtive battle had ceased completely, even the wind had abated, and somewhere on the road, distantly, he caught the rhythm of galloping hooves, very fast and light, as of a riderless horse in panic flight.

The gash in Roger Mauduit's left arm, just below the shoulder, was long but not deep, and grew shallower as it descended. The stroke that marked him thus could well have been meant for his heart. Cadfael's hurtling impact, at the very moment the attack was launched, had been the means of averting murder. The shadow that had melted into the night had no form, nothing about it rendered it human or recognisable. He had heard an outcry and run towards it, a projectile to strike attacked and attacker apart; questioned, that was all he could say.

For which, said Roger, bandaged and resting and warmed with mulled wine, he was heartily thankful. And indeed, Roger was behaving with remarkable fortitude and calm for a man who had just escaped death. By the time he had demonstrated to his dismayed grooms and men-at-arms that he was alive and not much the worse, appointed the hour when they should set out for Woodstock in the morning, and been helped to his bed by Goscelin, there was even a suggestion of complacency about him, as though a gash in the arm was a small price to pay for the successful retention of a valuable property and the defeat of his clerical opponents.

In the court of the palace of Woodstock the King's chamberlains, clerks, and judges were fluttering about in a curiously distracted manner, or so it seemed to Cadfael, standing apart among the commoners to observe their antics. They gathered in small groups, conversing in low voices and with anxious faces, broke apart to regroup with others of their kind, hurried in and out among the litigants, avoiding or brushing off all questions, exchanged documents, hurried to the door to peer out, as if looking for some late arrival. And

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there was indeed one litigant who had not kept to his time, for there was no sign of a Benedictine prior among those assembled, nor had anyone appeared to explain or justify his absence. And Roger Mauduit, in spite of his still and painful arm, continued to relax, with ever-increasing assurance, into shining complacency.

The appointed hour was already some minutes past when four agitated fellows, two of them Benedictine brothers, made a hasty entrance, and accosted the presiding clerk.

"Sir," bleated the leader, loud in nervous dismay, "we here are come from the abbey of Shrewsbury, escort to our prior, who was on his way to plead a case at law here. Sir, you must hold him excused, for it is not his blame nor ours that he cannot appear. In the forest some two miles north, as we rode hither last night in the dark, we were attacked by a band of lawless robbers, and they have seized our prior and dragged him away . . ."

The spokesman's voice had risen shrilly in his agitation, he had the attention of every man in the hall by this time. Certainly he had Cadfael's. Masterless men some two miles out of Woodstock, plying their trade last night, could only be the same who had happened upon Roger Mauduit and all but been the death of him. Any such gang, so close to the court, was astonishing enough, there could hardly be two. The clerk was outraged at the very idea.

"Seized and captured him? And you four were with him? Can this be true? How many were they who attacked you?"

"We could not tell for certain. Three at least—but they were lying in ambush, we had no chance to stand them off. They pulled him from his horse and were off into the trees with him. They knew the woods, and we did not. Sir, we did go after them, but they beat us off."

It was evident they had done their best, for two of them showed bruised and scratched, and all were soiled and torn as to their clothing.

"We have hunted through the night, but found no trace, only we caught his horse a mile down the highway as we came hither. So we plead here that our prior's absence be not seen as a default, for indeed he would have been here in the town last night if all had gone as it should."

"Hush, wait!" said the clerk peremptorily.

All heads had turned towards the door of the hall, where a great flurry of officials had suddenly surged into view, cleaving through the press with fixed and ominous haste, to take the centre of the

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floor below the King's empty dais. A chamberlain, elderly and authoritative, struck the floor loudly with his staff and commanded silence. And at sight of his face silence fell like a stone.

"My lords, gentlemen, all who have pleas here this day, and all others present, you are bidden to disperse, for there will be no hearings today. All suits that should be heard here must be postponed three days, and will be heard by His Grace's judges. His Grace the King cannot appear."

This time the silence fell again like a heavy curtain, muffling even thought or conjecture.

"The court is in mourning from this hour. We have received news of desolating import. His Grace with the greater part of his fleet made the crossing to England safely, as is known, but the *Blanche Nef,* in which His Grace's son and heir, Prince William, with all his companions and many other noble souls were embarked, put to sea late, and was caught in gales before ever clearing Barfleur. The ship is lost, split upon a rock, foundered with all hands, not a soul is come safe to land. Go hence quickly, and pray for the souls of the flower of this realm."

So that was the end of one man's year of triumph, an empty achievement, a ruinous victory, Normandy won, his enemies routed, and now everything swept aside, broken apart upon an obstinate rock, washed away in a malicious sea. His only lawful son, recently married in splendour, now denied even a coffin and a grave, for if ever they found those royal bodies it would be by the relenting grace of God, for the sea seldom put its winnings ashore by Barfleur. Even some of his unlawful sons, of whom there were many, gone down with their royal brother, no one left but the one legal daughter to inherit a barren empire.

Cadfael walked alone in a corner of the King's park and considered the foolishness of mortal vainglory, that was paid for with such a bitter price. But also he thought of the affairs of little men, to whom even a luckless King owed justice. For somewhere there was still to be sought the lost prior of Shrewsbury, carried off by masterless men in the forest, a litigant who might still be lost three days hence, when his suit came up again for hearing, unless someone in the meantime knew where to look for him.

He was in little doubt now. A lawless gang at liberty so close to a royal palace was in any case unlikely enough, and Cadfael was liable to brood on the unlikely. But that there should be two—no, that was impossible. And if one only, then that same one whose

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ambush he had overheard at some distance, yet close enough, too close for comfort, to Roger Mauduit's hunting lodge.

Probably the unhappy brothers from Shrewsbury were off beating the wilds of the forest afresh. Cadfael knew better where to look. No doubt Roger was biting his nails in some anxiety over the delay, but he had no reason to suppose that three days would release the captive to appear against him, nor was he paying much attention to what his Welsh man-at-arms was doing with this time.

Cadfael took his horse and rode back without haste towards the hunting lodge. He left in the early dusk, as soon as the evening meal was over in Mauduit's lodging. No one was paying any heed to him by that time of day. All Roger had to do was hold his tongue and keep his wits about him for three days, and the disputed manor would still be adjudged to him. Everything was beautifully in hand, after all.

Two of the men-at-arms and one groom had been left behind at the hunting lodge. Cadfael doubted if the man they guarded was to be found in the house itself, for unless he was blindfolded he would be able to gather far too much knowledge of his surroundings, and the fable of the masterless men would be tossed into the rubbish heap. No, he would be held in darkness, or dim light at best, even during the day, in straw or the rush flooring of a common hut, fed adequately but plainly and roughly, as wild men might keep a prisoner they were too cautious to kill, or too superstitious, until they turned him loose in some remote place, stripped of everything he had of value. On the other hand, he must be somewhere securely inside the boundary fence, otherwise there would be too high a risk of his being found. Between the gate and the house there were trees enough to obscure the large holding of a man of consequence. Somewhere among the stables and barns, or the now empty kennels, there he must be held.

Cadfael tethered his horse in cover well aside from the lodge and found himself a perch in a tall oak tree, from which vantage point he could see over the fence into the courtyard.

He was in luck. The three within fed themselves at leisure before they fed the prisoner, preferring to wait for dark. By the time the groom emerged from the hall with a pitcher and a bowl in his hands. Cadfael had his night eyes. They were quite easy about their charge, expecting no interference from any man. The groom vanished momentarily between the trees within the enclosure, but appeared again at one of the low buildings tucked under the fence, set down

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his pitcher for a moment while he hoisted clear a heavy wooden bar that held the door fast shut, and vanished within. The door thudded to after him, as though he had slammed it shut with his back braced against it, taking no chances even with an elderly monastic. In a few minutes he emerged again empty-handed, hauled the bar into place again, and returned, whistling, to the hall and the enjoyment of Mauduit's ale.

Not the stables nor the kennels, but a small, stout hay-store built on short wooden piles raised from the ground. At least the prior would have fairly snug lying.

Cadfael let the last of the light fade before he made a move. The wooden wall was stout and high, but more than one of the old trees outside leaned a branch over it, and it was no great labour to climb without and drop into the deep grass within. He made first for the gate, and quietly unbarred the narrow wicket set into it. Faint threads of torchlight filtered through the chinks in the hall shutters, but nothing else stirred. Cadfael laid hold of the heavy bar of the storehouse door, and eased it silently out of its socket—opening the door by cautious inches, and whispering through the chink: "Father . . . ?"

There was a sharp rustling of hay within, but no immediate reply.

"Father Prior, is it you? Softly . . . Are you bound?"

A hesitant and slightly timorous voice said: "No." And in a moment, with better assurance: "My son, you are not one of these sinful men?"

"Sinful man I am, but not of their company. Hush, quietly now! I have a horse close by. I came from Woodstock to find you. Reach me your hand, Father, and come forth."

A hand came wavering out of the hay-scented darkness to clutch convulsively at Cadfael's hand. The pale patch of a tonsured crown gleamed faintly, and a small, rounded figure crept forth and stepped into the thick grass. He had the wit to waste no breath then on questions, but stood docile and silent while Cadfael re-barred the door on emptiness, and taking him by the hand, led him softly along the fence to the unfastened wicket in the great gate. Only when the door was closed as softly behind them did he heave a great, thankful sigh.

They were out, it was done, and no one would be likely to learn of the escape until morning. Cadfael led the way to where he had left his horse tethered. The forest lay serene and quiet about them.

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"You ride, Father, and I'll walk with you. It's no more than two miles into Woodstock. We're safe enough now."

Bewildered and confused by so sudden a reversal, the prior confided and obeyed like a child. Not until they were out on the silent highroad did he say sadly, "I have failed of my mission. Son, may God bless you for this kindness, which is beyond my understanding. For how did you know of me, and how could you divine where to find me? I understand nothing of what has been happening to me. And I am not a very brave man . . . But my failure is no fault of yours, and my blessing I owe you without stint."

"You have not failed, Father," said Cadfael simply. "The suit is still unheard, and will be for three days more. All your companions are safe in Woodstock, except that they fret and search for you. And if you know where they will be lodging, I would recommend that you join them now, by night, and stay well out of sight until the day the case is heard. For if this trap was designed to keep you from appearing in the King's court, some further attempt might yet be made. Have you your evidences safe? They did not take them?"

"Brother Orderic, my clerk, was carrying the documents, but he could not conduct the case in court. I only am accredited to represent my abbot. But, my son, how is it that the case still goes unheard? The King keeps strict day and time, it's well known. How comes it that God and you have saved me from disgrace and loss?"

"Father, for all too bitter reason the King could not be present."

Cadfael told him the whole of it, how half the young chivalry of England had been wiped out in one blow, and the King left without an heir. Prior Heribert, shocked and dismayed, fell to praying in a grieving whisper for both dead and living, and Cadfael walked beside the horse in silence, for what more was there to be said? Except that King Henry, even in this shattering hour, willed that his justices should still prevail, and that was virtue in any monarch. Only when they came into the sleeping town did Cadfael again interrupt the prior's fervent prayers with a strange question.

"Father, was any man of your escort carrying steel? A dagger, or any such weapon?"

"No, no, God forbid!" said the prior, shocked. "We have no use for arms. We trust in God's peace, and after it in the King's."

"So I thought," said Cadfael nodding. "It is another discipline, for another venture."

* * *

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By the change in Mauduit's countenance Cadfael knew the hour of the following day when the news reached him that the prisoner was flown. All the rest of that day he went about with nerves at stretch and ears pricked for any sensational rumours being bandied around the town, and eyes roving anxiously in dread of the sight of Prior Heribert in court or street, braced to pour out his complaint to the King's officers. But as the hours passed and still there was no sign, he began to be a little eased in his mind, and to hope still for a miraculous deliverance. The Benedictine brothers were seen here and there, mute and sombre-faced; surely they could have had no word of their superior. There was nothing to be done but set his teeth, keep his countenance, wait and hope.

The second day passed, and the third day came, and Mauduit's hopes had soared again, for still there was no word. He made his appearance before the King's judge confidently, his charters in hand. The abbey was the suitor. If all went well, Roger would not even have to state his case, for the plea would fail of itself when the pleader failed to appear.

It came as a shattering shock when a sudden stir at the door, prompt to the hour appointed, blew into the hall a small, round, unimpressive person in the Benedictine habit, hugging to him an armful of vellum rolls, and followed by his black-gowned brothers in close attendance. Cadfael, too, was observing him with interest, for it was the first time he had seen him clearly. A modest man of comfortable figure and amiable countenance, rosy and mild. Not so old as that night journey had suggested, perhaps forty-five, with a shining innocence about him. But to Roger Mauduit it might have been a fire-breathing dragon entering the hall.

And who would have expected, from that gentle, even deprecating presence, the clarity and expertise with which that small man deployed his original charter, punctiliously identical to Roger's, according to the account Alard had given, and omitting any specific mention of what should follow Arnulf Mauduit's death—how scrupulously he pointed out the omission and the arguments to which it might give rise, and followed it up with two letters written by that same Arnulf Mauduit to Abbot Fulchered, referring in plain terms to the obligatory return of the manor and village after his death, and pledging his son's loyal observance of the obligation.

It might have been want of proofs that caused Roger to make so poor a job of refuting the evidence, or it might have been craven conscience. Whatever the cause, judgement was given for the abbey.

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* * *

Cadfael presented himself before the lord he was leaving barely an hour after the verdict was given.

"My lord, your suit is concluded, and my service with it. I have done what I pledged, here I part from you."

Roger sat sunk in gloom and rage, and lifted upon him a glare that should have felled him, but failed of its impact.

"I misdoubt me," said Roger, smouldering, "how you have observed your loyalty to me. Who else could know . . . " He bit his tongue in time, for as long as it remained unsaid no accusation had been made, and no rebuttal was needed. He would have liked to ask: How *did* you know? But he thought better of it. "Go, then, if you have nothing more to say."

"As to that," said Cadfael meaningly, "nothing more need be said. It's over." And that was recognisable as a promise, but with uneasy implications, for plainly on some other matter he still had a thing to say.

"My lord, give some thought to this, for I was until now in your service, and wish you no harm. Of those four who attended Prior Heribert on his way here, not one carried arms. There was neither sword nor dagger nor knife of any kind among the five of them."

He saw the significance of that go home, slowly but with bitter force. The masterless men had been nothing but a children's tale, but until now Roger had thought, as he had been meant to think, that that dagger-stroke in the forest had been a bold attempt by an abbey servant to defend his prior. He blinked and swallowed and stared, and began to sweat, beholding a perilous gulf into which he had all but stumbled.

"There were none there who bore arms," said Cadfael, "but your own."

A double-edged ambush that had been, to have him out in the forest by night, all unsuspecting. And there were as many miles between Woodstock and Sutton Mauduit returning as coming, and there would be other nights as dark on the way.

"Who?" asked Roger in a grating whisper. "Which of them? Give him a name!"

"No," said Cadfael simply. "Do your own divining. I am no longer in your service, I have said all I mean to say."

Roger's face had turned grey. He was hearing again the plan unfolded so seductively in his ear. "You cannot leave me so! If you

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know so much, for God's sake return with me, see me safely home, at least. You, I could trust!"

"No," said Cadfael again. "You are warned, now guard yourself."

It was fair, he considered: it was enough. He turned and went away without another word. He went, just as he was, to Vespers in the parish church, for no better reason—or so he thought then—than that the dimness within the open doorway beckoned him as he turned his back on a duty completed, inviting him to quietness and thought, and the bell was just sounding. The little prior was there, ardent in thanksgiving, one more creature who had fumbled his way to the completion of a task, and the turning of a leaf in the book of his life.

Cadfael watched out the office, and stood mute and still for some time after priest and worshippers had departed. The silence after their going was deeper than the ocean and more secure than the earth. Cadfael breathed and consumed it like new bread. It was the light touch of a small hand on the hilt of his sword that startled him out of that profound isolation. He looked down to see a little acolyte, no higher than his elbow, regarding him gravely from great round eyes of blinding blue, intent and challenging, as solemn as ever was angelic messenger.

"Sir," said the child in stern treble reproof, tapping the hilt with an infant finger, "should not all weapons of war be laid aside here?"

"Sir," said Cadfael hardly less gravely, though he was smiling, "you may very well be right." And slowly he unbuckled the sword from his belt, and went and laid it down, flatlings, on the lowest step under the altar. It looked strangely appropriate and at peace there. The hilt, after all, was a cross.

Prior Heribert was at a frugal supper with his happy brothers in the parish priest's house when Cadfael asked audience with him. The little man came out graciously to welcome a stranger, and knew him for an acquaintance at least, and now at a breath certainly a friend.

"You, my son! And surely it was you at Vespers? I felt that I should know the shape of you. You are the most welcome of guests here, and if there is anything I and mine can do to repay you for what you did for us, you need but name it."

"Father," said Cadfael, briskly Welsh in his asking, "do you ride for home tomorrow?"

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"Surely, my son, we leave after Prime. Abbot Godefrid will be waiting to hear how we have fared."

"Then, Father, here am I at the turning of my life, free of one master's service, and finished with arms. Take me with you!"

ON OUR COVER

Edith Pargeter (Ellis Peters) was born in Shropshire, England and educated at local schools. She spent seven years working as a pharmacist's assistant before joining the Women's Royal Naval Service (W.R.E.N.S.) in World War II, where she served in the communications department and was eventually decorated by King George VI.

Already the author of ten books, Miss Pargeter devoted herself to writing full time after the war. In 1959, she began writing mysteries under the pseudonym Ellis Peters to distinguish those novels from the historical fiction she wrote under her own name. As Ellis Peters, she has written two mystery series, one featuring contemporary police inspector George Felse, and the other medieval Benedictine monk Brother Cadfael. She has won both an Edgar Award from the Mystery Writers of America and a Silver Dagger from the British Crime Writers Association.

Miss Pargeter has a special interest in Czechoslovakia and has published several English translations of Czechoslovakian literature. She lives in Shropshire, England, where she continues to work on the Ellis Peters mysteries. Her most recent U.S. publication is *The Summer of the Danes,* (Mysterious Press).

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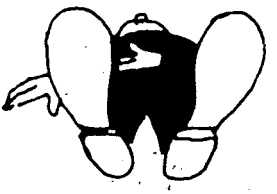

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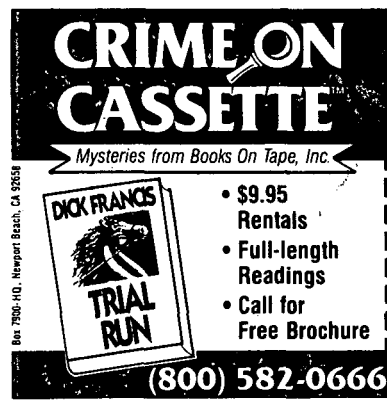

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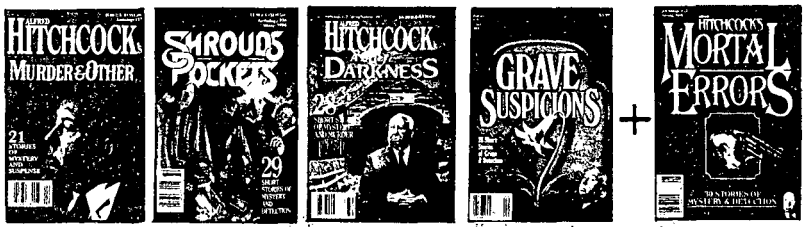

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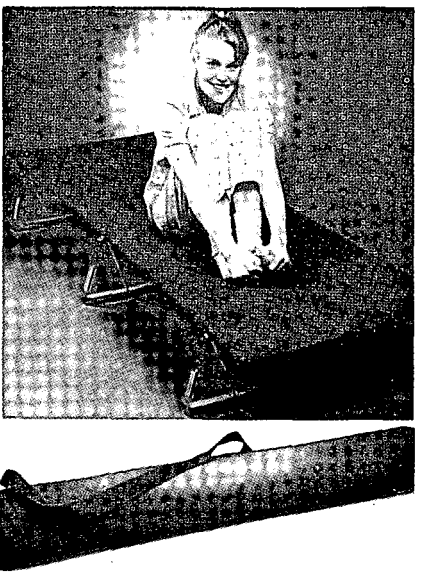

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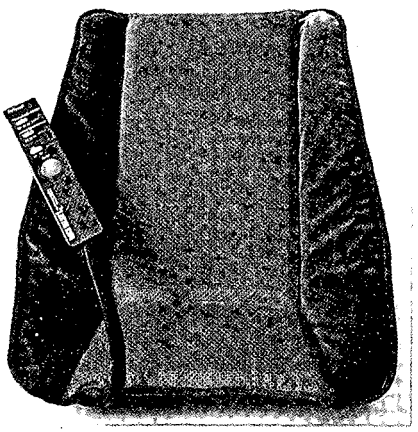

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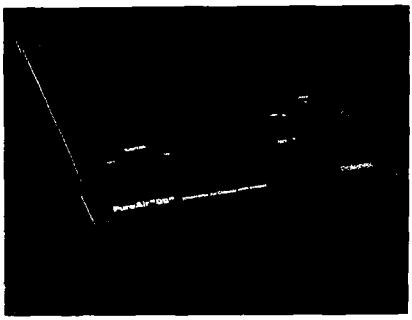

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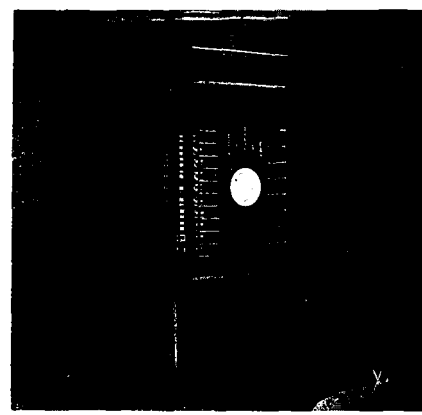
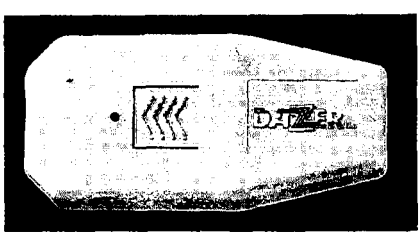
► D-BUG LIGHT



Don't let flying pests spoil your next outdoor activity. Just bring along the D-Bug Light, electronic bug killer lantern. More than just a great bug zapper, this unit combines the zapper with a fluorescent lantern and a safety blinker. Portable and easy to carry with its own handle, the D-Bug Light is made of high impact durable plastic. Uses two 6 volt batteries (not inc.) 12 volt DC receptacle adapts to car, RV or boat battery, so its great for camping, boating, picnics, backyards. So don't let bugs spoil your outdoor fun—just "de-bug"! **$59.98** ($5.00) #A1964.

▼ THE DAZER™



Even the most dedicated canine aficionado can sometimes encounter unfriendly dogs. Dazer™ provides a humane way to repel their advance, emitting ultrasonic sound waves inaudible to humans and totally safe for dogs (unlike mace and other common deterrents). Pocket size (4¾" long) plastic case can also clip on belt; takes 1-9V battery, included. For joggers, hikers, bikers, seniors and kids—plus the proverbial postman. **$29.98**, ($3.00) #A1829X.

TO ORDER: Send check with item number for total amounts, plus shipping & handling shown in ( ) payable to **MAIL ORDER MALL**, Dept. 042 EL, P.O. Box 3006, Lakewood, N.J. 08701, or call TOLL FREE **1-800-722-9999.** NJ residents add 6% sales tax. We honor MasterCard/Visa. Sorry, no Canadian, foreign, or C.O.D. orders. Satisfaction Guaranteed. 30 day money back guarantee for exchange or refund. Allow 30 days for delivery.

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